

Editor's Foreword:

Here's the next volume in the series, *Continuing On My Own*. I scrounged around the previous releases to try and put together a translator's forward because I think it's really important to try and preserve what the original team wanted to say (especially since I couldn't ever contact them for their permission to alter their work).

It's a little short, mostly because the translator didn't have much to say this time, but also because the majority of what she was saying is no longer applicable. For example recruiting members for Boku-Tachi would be pointless at this point because they've since become an inactive group, and commenting on the release frequency is similarly pointless because this is all coming out at the same time.

I also would like to point out that while she may have had every intention of continuing the series, Brandi never did, and a new translator (Shandy) picked up *Burning One man Force*.

She and her team were never able to finish that project, however, and someone else picked up translating from there, but never had an editor or proofreader or anything of that sort; but that's for later.

In the meantime enjoy this volume, it's a doozy!

~Moonfaerie24

Translator's Foreword:

So, here we go, finally continuing with this story.

A question I get asked: where can I find the original novels? I get all of my novels from <http://www.amazon.co.jp>. They do have an English interface, but I don't know how inclusive it is.

The next novel in the series is called "Moeru (Burning) One Man Force", and it comes out in book form this month. For those wondering, yes, I do have every intention of translating that book after this one.

I guess that's it for now. Stay tuned for future releases ^^

~Brandi

Full Metal Panic!

Continuing On My Own

By Shoji Gotoh



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Prologue

The sky was leaden, and the sound of breaking waves could be heard in the distance.

In a deserted cemetery facing a beach on the outskirts of Portsmouth, a row of irregular crosses extended out into the horizon. Walking alone, Teletha Testarossa made her way through the silent dead.

She was clutching two bouquets of red flowers in her hands.

The cold North Atlantic wind stung her cheeks.

She remembered the location very well. It was just ahead.

Ah, there it is...

She finally came to a stop in front of a pair of crosses lined up close together. Engraved on each were the names and the dates of birth and death of her parents.

Tessa bent down and gently placed a bouquet on each.

It was six years today.

It felt like such a short, as well as such a long amount of time.

So many things had happened since then. So much had changed.

There was no more warm fireside. She was no longer able to freely exhibit the vast amount of knowledge she had so innocently learned. She would probably never again see those people on the street who would smile and say hello.

Because she could never go back.

That little girl, who, with no one else to depend on, had thrown herself sobbing on the sleeve of her twin brother, was gone.

The mad wheels of time would probably never turn back.

So she had chosen to fight. Whether or not that would connect her with something to save, even that was uncertain.

A gentle voice said, “Well, this is a surprise.”

A young man was standing in the middle of a cluster of gravestones. His silver hair waved in the wind, and his eyes were as peaceful as a spring. He- Leonard Testarossa, was also carrying two bouquets.

“But, I see you came after all.”

“I’m also surprised,” she said, not looking especially astonished.

“It seems you still remembered about Mother and Father.”

“I remember. That’s the problem.”

Leonard smiled innocently.

“You’ve grown, Teletha. You’re stronger and more beautiful than ever. I wonder if riding around on that toy has been a good experience for you.”

“Yes, very.”

She stared at him, dispensing with the small talk.

“I’ve lost several of my subordinates. If I haven’t learned anything from that, then I disgrace their lives.”

“The dead have no honor or dignity.”

“If that’s true, then why are you here?”

“I thought I might be able to speak to you. And- that maybe here, I might be able to take you with me.”

“It’s no use. Because, you see-”

The silver-haired girl messed with the scarf wrapped around her neck, and slowly untied it.

The wind caught it and flapped it around.

“You’re my enemy now.”



An instant later, the space behind her shook. A pale phosphorescence appeared and danced around. A white AS appeared as if it had seeped in through the atmosphere. It was the ARX-7 Arbalest.

Having now cancelled its ECS, the Arbalest was in a kneeling position, pointing the end of a shot cannon straight at Leonard.

At the same time, however, Leonard gracefully raised his right hand over his head, as if he were conducting a waltz. The same phenomenon then took place behind him. The figure of a red AS instantly appeared wrapped in a small flash of lightning. It was Venom.

There were now two giants, each accompanying the brother and sister.

It was gun muzzle opposite gun muzzle. They each held their own in the cold, blustery wind.

Finally, Leonard broke into a smile.

“I see. It seems you’re ready to finish it. However- let’s call it quits for today. Doing it here would, in your words, disgrace the *dignity of the dead.*”

The Venom, still carefully holding its gun, presented its right hand to Leonard. With refined and polished movements, he sat down gracefully in its palm.

“Goodbye, Teletha. And to you over there, as well.”

The Venom stood up. Through the dancing wind, Tessa yelled, “This is the final warning. Stop helping them.”

“Teletha. You yourself should wash your hands of those people.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Take care of the flowers. Lay them on the graves for me.”

The Venom, stepping backwards, operated its ECS.

There was a squall of wind and dust. A flash of light and a crash.

The enemy was gone. The sound of its propulsion system moved off.

Tessa and the Arbalest were left behind in the empty graveyard.

“...Captain. Are you hurt?”

The dark voice of the pilot- Sousuke Sagara, resounded over the white AS’s external speakers.

There were a number of chaotically broken gravestones. He had probably left them- Tessa, picking up the dropped flowers, feebly mumbled, “No... I’m fine. Let’s withdraw. Please call the helicopter.”

Chapter 1: The Prediction and Visit

[#990129_2342 IP:xx.xxx.xxx.115]

[#title/The Pacif and a certain city school]

[#name/none]

[#Even though there was the *Pacific Chrysalis* sea-jacking incident on the 24th of last month, the people around here have come to the conclusion that it has nothing to do with Shun On high jacking incident? It didn't really get reported on because Bush's son was blown up the same day, but there's no way I can believe that it's just a coincidence that the same school was involved in both]

[#That conspiracy theory again? It's old news. Get over it]

[#Die!]

[#It's strange for you to get so serious about it. It's definitely unusual when the same school is involved in two terrorist attacks in eight months, but there probably isn't a reason]

[#Isn't it obvious? It's the intentions of the people running a certain country. They're trying to kidnap a lot of our high school girls for love brothel(following omitted)]

[#Was that the particular wish of the last girl rescued from Shun On?]

[#She's just a dog. Not worth knowing]

[#Oh really? The photograph in the paper was blurry, but I thought she looked pretty cute]

[#She's got big breasts, too. I saw them with my heart's eyes]

[#Careful, Echelon's watching]

[#Looks like Echelon's entered "big breasts" as a keyword recently]

[#What's Echelon?]

[#Hide]

[#Seriously, can someone tell me what that girl's origins really are, and not what's just in the news? I heard her dad's an official in the UN]

[#Probably environmental high commissioner Chidori. But he's not a high official. The scale and budget is completely different from that of the refugee high commissioner you hear about in the news all the time. It's a new, small position. If they were going to take hostages, there are more valuable targets]

[#In other words, it's OK to say that Chidori chick is a big-breasted beauty?]

[#I wish you'd upload that picture]

[#This is the first time I've replied here. I have an acquaintance from college who is a reporter for a certain newspaper. When we were drinking, catching up on old times, he complained about the story. It seems that the higher-ups were insisting that they take the victims' rights into consideration and hold back on collecting data about the school in question. One of his colleagues that nevertheless tried to collect information about it was sent to some remote location in Tajikistan. There's something in that school]

[#If there is something lol]

[#That's what I'm saying! The people at the top want young high school girls! If they are opposed, then they'll take the Tepodans, and(following omitted)]^{*1}

[#Die]

[#I'm more interested in the picture of what they call an M9 taken by a student at Shun On. Isn't that the latest high-efficiency AS?]

[#That picture's been doctored. Since the M9's still in the testing stages even in the US Army, there's no way that they could use it for such a delicate operation. Besides, the monomolecular cutter it's holding is way too big, and the head sensor and blade antenna is completely different from the M9 they're testing now]

[#But in the initial M9 blueprints, weren't there sketches of a similar-looking command machine?]

[#Oh, that. When it was taken, they were selling the 1/48 Itareri kit (out of print). Its name is also XM9. That plastic model is based on the sketches published by the Pentagon back in those days. But the Edge had a bad reputation for 'gimme gimme' lol. Right now the most accurate one is the Tamiya kit]

[#I remember an F-19]

[#Military geek. Go away]

[#My cousin goes to Jindai High, and he says it's pretty weird. He's a third year student, so he wasn't involved in any of the incidents, but he said there's always trouble around that girl. Violent accidents and small fires and stuff. And it's all been ignored]

[#Just talk to a psychic about it. So that girl has big breasts?]

[#Shutup]

[#This is a serious conversation. That Chidori guy has been investigating the problem of illegal dumping of hospital waste, like all those needles in sacks marked 'biohazard' they discovered in the mountains in the Philippines and stuff. They say that certain Japanese companies and the government are all throwing away their garbage in Southeast Asia. Don't you think that someone like that Chidori guy, who made a lot of enemies during the NGO era, is being threatened by some kind of power?]

[#So highjack the plane and ship his daughter's riding?
That's a little far out on the logic]

[#That girl's an alien. She receives electromagnetic waves from the planet Vega to bring forbidden technology to Earth. Arm Slaves and stealth fighters, all of it's technology from Vega]

[#Electromagnetic waves idiot. Go away]

[#Either way, that girl is strange]

◆ ◆ ◆

It was sixth period in the gymnasium. The candidates stood on a podium in front of the not-very-enthusiastic student body, speaking warmly about their own ambitions.

“Whereas! I can declare to you that the closed manner in which the current student council runs is only protecting the interests of a portion of the clubs and committees! If I am elected, I will implement a more liberal student council, and I promise a bright school life. So please, vote for me, Tarou Yamada!”

Sparse applause. The second year student, wearing boyish glasses, raised his shoulders up and down, bowed, then walked briskly off the stage.

“Thank you. Next up is Ryouichi Sugiyama from 2nd year, class 5 to give his pledge-” the soft female voice of the student council secretary reported from the mike in the wings. A member of the music club, wearing an acoustic guitar strapped over his shoulder, passed beside her and headed up on the stage. It was the student who had placed the bet with Sousuke in the flirting battle for the clubroom some time ago.

“What's up? I'm Sugiyama, and I'm announcing my candidacy. If I'm elected, I wanna have a concert in the gym once a month.”

“Awesome!”

Half-interested hooting came from a portion of the students.

“Alright, then. I’ve prepared a song for everyone today. I’d like you to listen to it.”

The candidate strummed the guitar and began to sing enthusiastically.

The teachers looked on grimly, but couldn’t cut in. It had been agreed that there was to be “no interference with the contents of the speeches” for the sake of a democratic election, but there had been no exchange between the current student council president and the teachers’ camp.

Kaname Chidori, who had been listening to the amateur’s boast from backstage, just sighed.

“...he’s using this more as an opportunity for a solo than to give a speech.”

“Is that so?” said Sousuke Sagara, standing beside her. He surveyed the assembly hall carefully, then whispered into the radio in his hand, “Headquarters to Alpha One. Is there anything unusual?”

“This is Alpha One. There’s nothing unusual- I think,” replied the first year student in charge of equipment over the radio.

“‘I think’ is problematic. Your report should be definite.”

“Roger-”

“Stay on alert as you are. Over and out.”

Sousuke turned off his radio, and Kaname gave him a sideways glance.

“...what’ve you been sneaking around since earlier for?”

“Security. Because of the election of the student president. There’s no guarantee that someone hasn’t plotted the assassination of an opposing candidate.”

Sousuke was given the questionable post of head of security/aide to the student president by the student council. To say it plainly, he was responsible for security, but in reality it was a way to keep him busy with odd jobs. But whenever there was an event like this, Sousuke would try to fulfill his duty, and do more than was necessary.

“Although naturally, I had wanted all students to oblige to a hand bag check and metal detector inspection.”

“Oh, god, not this again... there’s no way that someone’s plotted an assassination, is there? If we were to do such a thing, how many hours do you think it would have taken to get everyone in the gym?”

“That’s why I gave up on the idea.”

“I can’t tell whether or not that’s progress...”

It had already been nine months since Sousuke had started school here. Indeed, the number of overblown disturbances that had taken place in the beginning had dwindled as time passed.

“It’s my last job in this current student council. I wanted to do my best,” he said in a tone of such candidness that Kaname was denied her fretfulness.

Kaname, who served as the student council vice president, wasn’t announcing her candidacy in this election, because she would soon be a third year student, and would have to take exams.

From the start, the student president and vice president would customarily assume office as a first year student, then pass through most of their second year. The current student president, who was in his third year and would be graduating soon, was a bit of a different case.

The music club member’s performance continued. It was just the right bit of savviness.

There was Japanese love mixed in with that snappy, Yutaka Ozaki-like melody. The lyrics were quite amateurish.

*“Everyday I spend with you shines brightly
Just like I’ve seen the sun
Just like that smile you gave
But time passes, and we can’t go back
All of the sadness, anger and love”*

The winter air in the gym was cold. In particular, the area backstage was, for some reason, freezing. Even though they were only about ten meters from the cluster of several-hundred warm students.

“I don’t like this song,” Sousuke suddenly muttered. Since it was rare for him to express such an opinion about these kinds of things, Kaname was more than a little surprised.

“...this one?”

“Yes. It’s unpleasant.”

“You think so? Well, I guess it’s just your common, run-of-the-mill emotional song.”

“But I don’t like it.”

“I see...”

Was it possible that he was in a bad mood? Kaname thought, and started to casually move a half-a-step away, when Sousuke uttered, “It was just a thought. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

The performance ended. The music club member left the stage amidst applause.

“How many people are left?”

“Four, I think. We’ll run a little late, but that’s okay.”

The next candidate, a female student, started to move towards the platform during the announcement. She was a first-year student that had been helping out the student council, and was a member of the swim team as well. For now, it looked like she was using a sex-appeal strategy because, despite the fact that it was freezing inside, she was wearing a racing swimsuit. Her slender shoulders were trembling slightly. Her tightly-tensed bottom looked cold indeed, and her lips appeared to have turned purple.

“Umm, are you alright?”

“Of course I am, Miss Chidori!” the girl answered Kaname with a smile as she clenched her fists. Flames of something burned brightly within the depths of her large, round eyes.

“You just kind of look like you’re shaking.”

“No, I’m just shaking with excitement, because I’m going to be the successor entrusted with the future of the student council! I’m completely calm so that I will be elected!”

“I-I see. Well, good luck, then.”

“Thank you! Just watch me, because I will win for sure! ...allll right!” she yelled, getting into the fighting spirit and slapping her cheeks with both hands. She then energetically jumped up on the stage.

“Hellooo! My name is Yui Morigawa, and I’m running for the next student council *star*

“It’s a little embarrassing, but since I’m in the swim club, I thought I’d come dressed like this *star*”

Suddenly the assembly was filled with roaring and cheering. Kaname watched the scene with half-surprise, and Sousuke said lightly, “She looks like a person I saw at the school festival.” Indeed, her performance closely resembled the performance Kaname had seen during the “Miss Jindai” contest at the school festival.

“...what’re you saying?”

“Nothing,” Sousuke feigned ignorance and reached for his radio.



It took over six hours on the day that they counted ballots for the results to be determined.

It was quite dark-looking beyond the window of the student council room. In front of Kaname, the members that comprised the student council, and the consulting teacher, the second year election committee student read the results of the vote out loud.

“-Kaoru Takasaki, 157 votes. Ryouichi Sugiyama, 214 votes. And... finally, Yui Morigawa, 249 votes. There were 128 bad votes.”

The management committee member cut him off.

“...very well. It looks like the 54th student council president will be first year student Yui Morigawa. The vice president will be first year student Hiromi Sasaki, the secretary will be first year Kashi Sogata, the treasurer will be first year Hiroshi Kurata, and the auditor will be second year Ren Mikihara.”

“Right!”

“Thanks for all the hard work, everyone.”

“Good job, good job.”

All present gave a polite round of applause. Those who had been elected were student council regulars and people who had held various posts until now, but because they were candidates they were not there.

“Okay, that’s all,” the supervising teacher, Eri Kagurazaka, said easily, then turned her gaze on the student council president, who was sitting in his official chair.

“Well, didn’t this go exactly as you speculated, Hayashimizu?”

That student, the 53rd student council president, Atsunobu Hayashimizu, looked down and shrugged. He was a young man with clever looks, a tall figure and pale skin. He wore elegant glasses on his long, slit eyes. The bridge of his nose continued straight down.

“What I speculated and who the students voted for are unrelated, Miss Kagurazaka. This was always a democratic election,” he said in a very calm voice.

It was well known that Hayashimizu, who possessed far more bargaining power and ability to make use of talent than an underhanded politician, had recommended Yui Morigawa for the position of president. The swimsuit fan service at the assembly had certainly been effective, but it was a fact that a number of the students had chosen based solely on Hayashimizu’s recommendation.

Policies and budget management weren’t that difficult to discuss.

Virtually everyone in the school had fond memories of the two years he had served as the council president.

He had improved the equipment and facilities of every club, had accrued petty championships in all ballgame tournaments, athletic festivals and art contests, and had done away with many various regulations concerning the programs at the Culture Festival. He had brought music magazines and fashion magazines into the library room, increased the selling scope of the bakery and added a full menu, and made it possible to go into the upstairs area that had been shut off in the old days. He had also opened up the gym, grounds and pool for health days. And starting next year, the

students would be given a large say in regards to the destination for the school field trip.

“The total sum of all this was very valuable.

“My intention is to just be free to graduate.”

When Eri Kagurazaka heard Hayashimizu’s words, she grinned cheerfully.

“That’s rather ominous. Your name as a reputed statesman will remain in history! What do you think about that?”

“That’s quite an honor. If that does happen, then I will try to refer to you as my teacher in the autobiography I write in my last years,” Hayashimizu replied in a manner that neither indicated joking nor seriousness.

“Thank you. But we mustn’t make fun of adult society, right?”

“I will take that to heart.”

“Okay, then, we’ll post the results of the election on the bulletin board. Thanks for everyone’s hard work,” she said in closing, then Eri left the student council room. The election committee members and several others went home. As Kaname made her preparations to follow suit, she said to Hayashimizu, “Well, well, it’s all over, isn’t it?”

“You’ve done very well, too, Miss Chidori.”

“Thanks. You, too,” Kaname grinned.

Kaname, who had, since her first semester of first year, kept an eye on and argued with President Hayashimizu, helped out with this and that for the student council, and finally ended up serving as the vice president- also had many things come to an end that week for her, as well. The fate of about a half a year. Naturally, she felt very strongly about it.

“Sagara, I want to thank you, as well.”

“Not at all, Mr. President,” Sousuke said, standing straight up.

“Mr. President, huh? But what will you call me after next week, I wonder? I’ll just be a normal third year student,” Hayashimizu said, to which Sousuke replied without any hesitation, “Previous Mr. President. And after next year, I hope you will allow me to call you Former Mr. President.”

Hayashimizu gave a pained smile.

“Well, so that I don’t disrespect that honor, I will have to conduct myself accordingly in my life hereafter, it seems. However, for the time being, just call me ‘Sir’.”

“Roger.”

When the two of them talked, Kaname always felt a little isolated. Their relationship was different from a simple friendship, or the bond between a boss and subordinate. Probably the best word to describe it was “sympathy”. There was something that ran through the foundation of these two, whose upbringings and personalities couldn’t be more different- the standards for behavior and values- not feelings, but a fundamental part that understood one another.

They respected each other.

If, by some chance, either one of them lost that respect, then, at that moment, their relationship would probably end.

Sousuke’s relationship with Hayashimizu was essentially like that of his with Kurz Weber, Melissa Mao, Andrei Kalinin, and everyone else in Mithril. It was different from his relationship with his classmates like Shinji Kazama, Tarou Onodera, Kyouko Tokiwa, and his homeroom teacher Eri Kagurazaka. Of course, it wasn’t as if Sousuke despised or shunned his classmates, but it was different from “trusting” them. He “depended” on them as innocent

friends, but he didn't "trust" them. When push came to shove, he didn't try to rely on Shinji, Kyouko or any of the others.

But Souseki trusted Hayashimizu. He might even rely on him. Hayashimizu also trusted Souseki. Kaname knew that because of all the strange disturbances that had taken place in the past nine months. That meant that finding a person like Atsunobu Hayashimizu in this type of school society was an exception to the exception.

I guess that makes him a strong comrade... she thought vaguely.

If that was so, then what did that make her?

"Chidori?"

"Huh?" Kaname came back to herself when she heard Souseki's voice.

"What is it?"

"Oh, it's nothing... speaking of which, Hayashimizu. I know it was a conversation you had with Miss Kagurazaka, but do you really have your aim on politics?"

"Hah hah. Of course not," Hayashimizu shook his head at himself. "Between 1,000 opponents and one hundred million opponents, the liberties one can take are much too different, although there were times in middle school when I considered such a path. Many things have happened to change that since then."

"...and that means what?"

"I was interested in people. People with an entirely different meaning from politics and the like."

"..."

Kaname suddenly remembered the picture of his old girlfriend whom he lost.

"I think I will try out different things in college. There are a limited number of recommended public institutions out there, but

another has an assistant professor who wrote a book that I've had my mind on, so I'm going to try and take the exams to get into there. I was going to try and take some sham examinations on the side, but- well, those won't be a problem in the first place. Unless I end up in a traffic accident on the day of the exams."

From how Hayashimizu talked, passing was probably most certain of the two.

"Ugh, it's annoying that you have all that free time. I'm going to be studying for the next year."

"Really? But when it comes to subjects like science and math, I thought the same thing *applied to you*, as well."

"Uh..." Kaname choked on her words for a moment.

"I heard about the term test rankings. I also read the second year exams. The evil tricky questions were left alone, but- even I couldn't have gotten such perfect scores."

"..."

There was no jealousy or sarcasm in Hayashimizu's tone. Kaname knew very well that he wasn't such a small man to be led by those kinds of motives. His way of speaking suggested that it was out of simple interest and doubt to test and see how she would respond.

"...no, I'm sorry."

He probably guessed at the somber look in her eyes, and Sousuke's subtle tension.

Hayashimizu looked a little regretful, cast his eyes downward and waved his right hand.

"Well, anyway, you should treasure your abilities."

"Ah... okay. You're right. Ah hah hah hah," she forced a laugh and scratched the back of her head. "W-well, I should be getting home. Sousuke, what about you?"

"Yes. We should be going."

“No- Sagara. I have something I’d like to talk to you about,” Hayashimizu got the better of Sousuke as he started getting ready to leave.

“What is it?”

“It’s just a simple thing. Would you stay for a bit?” he said, and looked out over Kaname, the treasurer and everyone from the election committee. Everyone other than Kaname had exchanged glances, muttered “good job” and left the student council room. Hayashimizu’s gaze rested on the remaining Kaname.

Somehow, she was in the way.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it- it’s a guy-thing. Then I’ll wait for you in the entranceway, Sousuke,” she said kindly at last and shrugged.

“Roger.”

“Sorry, Miss Chidori.”

Leaving Sousuke and Hayashimizu behind, Kaname walked out of the student council room.

Hayashimizu waited a bit after Kaname had left, then said, “Do you think she can hear us?”

“No,” Sousuke replied after concentrating a little bit.

“Let’s go to the roof just to make sure.”

Hayashimizu rose from his official chair and grabbed a bunch of keys hanging in one corner of the student council room.

“...?”

The two of them left the student council room. The ballot-counting operation had taken many hours, so the school was already completely dark and no one was there. The corridor seemed frozen by the winter air. They walked silently, up the stairs and out onto the rooftop of the south building. The sound of opening the rooftop door lock echoed very loudly in the silence.

The stars twinkled in the cold winter sky. It was already night time. The muffled sounds of car engines passing back and

forth on the nearby metropolitan streets resounded throughout the area.

Standing next to the air conditioning unit, which was making a muddled, clunky sound as it ran, Hayashimizu said, “Sagara.”

His loose hair was blown around by the compressor’s gentle breeze.

“What I’m about to tell you is just my nosing about. Just think of this as advice from a naive friend who doesn’t know any of the details.”

“....okay.”

The soon-to-be retired student council president was silent for five, six seconds; then he broke the ice with, “I don’t think you can carry on like this anymore.”

Those words carried pain. Those words carried weight.

Those expected words of Hayashimizu felt as if they had hollowed out the inside of Sousuke’s chest. Of course, he hadn’t told Hayashimizu about Mithril, himself, or Kaname’s history. Such a conversation had never taken place. He had avoided it.

But-

It wasn’t as if this clever young man wouldn’t realize the various problems relating to it.

It wasn’t as if he wouldn’t notice.

“...”

“You’re not the problem. If you tried a little harder, you might become a somewhat ordinary man. You’re already learning enough to compromise with our society. In time I think you’ll settle down into the level of just ‘your average eccentric person’. I know this because I’ve watched you put forth the effort. However-”

Hayashimizu then looked in the direction of the main entranceway. That was where Kaname was supposed to be waiting for Sousuke.

“-the problem is her.”

The dark look on his face as he said this was something that Sousuke had never seen before.



“I don’t know what it is she has. I’m not going to try to make any guesses or suppositions. But I can vaguely imagine the reason why you are here, as well as the reason why a number of incidents have taken place. And what is that? Her. Everything centers around her. It’s not just the high jacking or the sea-jacking, either. In the truly serious incidents, everything, without exception, has centered around her.”

If he did a little investigating- and listened to the students' stories- he would soon understand.

That's right.

It wasn't like he wouldn't notice.

"At first, I thought it was probably because of her father's position in the UN. But it's not, because that wouldn't explain everything. And there was another element that came out of the events she was involved in- your invariable absence, and the armed forces of unknown affiliations."

"..."

"That's all I know. I refrained from being too nosy, but it's something that I have even felt so far. It's only a matter of time before other people start making a fuss... and after next week, I'll just be an ordinary student. Then next month I'll be gone. I will no longer be able to accommodate you out of simple courtesy, and neither will Morikawa or any of the others elected today. Not only will she not have that kind of power; on the contrary, it's possible that she could become your enemy. She and the others may even try to exile you from this paradise which I have prepared for you. Why? You understand, right?"

"...because if Chidori and I were gone, this place would be safe."

"It's unfortunate, but true. It's probably not your fault, but when I heard about the Christmas incident, I really regretted my attitude so far. What if students had been hurt? What if they had been injured and died? I-"

Sousuke's jowl stiffened.

"I... it was supposed to be a safe mission."

He couldn't hold it back. Hayashimizu was the one person he couldn't help but want to vindicate things to. It didn't matter if

it was confidential. Sousuke repressed his own confusion, and arbitrarily started explaining matters furiously.

“We... we needed a clue as to who was targeting her. That was what the mission was for. We had always been on the defensive up until then... we wanted to do something. If we eliminate their colleagues’ positions and money, then the interference would stop. We have to do something. Then it should be safe. That’s why the Intelligence Department and Research Department are collecting analyses. It will only take a little longer. That’s all the power that my unit has. If we only had some more time-”

“I told you already. Your time is almost up.”

It was the first time that Sousuke had ever heard Hayashimizu speak in such a dark tone of voice.

“I-”

“I don’t want to say ‘That’s why you should leave.’ Like I said at the start of this conversation, this is just advice. However- it’s not hard for someone like me who doesn’t know the details to imagine this ending painfully... and now that my successor has been decided, my last concern was about you and her. I wanted to go ahead and tell you about the situation. I think you should discuss it with her,” Hayashimizu said in the serious voice of a prophet with a melancholic look in his eyes as he leaned against the fence.

“If you don’t leave, you’ll be tortured by regret later.”

Sousuke swallowed.

“I... I like it here.”

“So do I. Everyone’s so innocent. They’re naive and virtuous, but- they are human, after all. If they get scared, they become anxious. They also can become-”

He exhaled a cloud of white breath.

“-cruel.”

For a moment, an image froze in Sousuke’s mind.

Hostility.

The animus looks of those in their class, the student council and others. Hostility, mixed with terror, and without a shred of compassion- that sinister hatred. Unpleasantness, persecution, and resentment. And the figure of the girl who would be bearing the full brunt of it all.

It was a terribly frightening image.

Hayashimizu must have read the look on Sousuke’s face, because he then gave a little shrug and, returning back to his usual, carefree tone of voice, said, “But this may just be a problem of pessimism. In the end, this is only a school. Just a route.”

“A route...?”

“They’re forgetful. Life goes on. Even many years from now... here.”

Hayashimizu handed Sousuke the keys to the roof.

For some reason, that key ring felt very heavy.

“I’m going to go first. Someone’s been waiting for me. Please put the keys back for me.”

Hayashimizu walked towards the roof exit alone. The secretary was waiting in the doorway. She didn’t look as if she had heard their conversation.

“Sorry to make you wait.”

“Not at all.”

“You knew I would be here, didn’t you? You looked for me.”

“Yes. Well, just a little... he he.”

The black-haired girl gave him a refined smile. She gave a small nod over to Sousuke, then following after Hayashimizu, disappeared from the roof.



Sousuke was mostly silent on the way home from school, only making half-hearted responses to Kaname's gossip.

What did he and Hayashimizu talk about? Kaname thought, but kept her questions to herself for some reason. Something about the atmosphere coming from Sousuke told her to.

“...and you know? Shiori’s boyfriend just all of the sudden said, ‘I wanna break up’.”

“Is that so?”

“Isn’t that weird? And they seemed so lovey-dovey recently, too. I’ve even met him several times, but he seemed like such a serious person. But Shiori was already steaming mad. She just didn’t understand, and ended up calling my place at three in the morning.”

“Yeah.”

“So, I thought that it would be better if I just knew the reason, so when I called her boyfriend to hear what he had to say, god, it was so funny. It seems that there was some kind of misunderstanding, and while they were at the movies during all of this, Ono D, who was with them, was... hey.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, never mind.”

They got off the train, which was packed with people because of the evening rush; and after they had walked a little while from the station, Kaname got fed up, stopped where she was and groaned.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re acting strange. Well, you always act strange, but...”

As he drew closer to the exasperated Kaname, Sousuke eventually blinked his eyes as if he had finally heard her voice.

“Sorry.”

“Mm. Is it because you’re sad about your job in the student council ending?”

“No, it’s not really that... I’ve just been thinking a little.”

“About what?”

When she asked him this, Sousuke’s lips knotted up as he started to say something- but in the end, he just shook his head.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, is it?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Huh? Strange...”

The two of them began to walk again.

The nighttime shopping district was bleak, and the people on their way home were naturally walking fast.

How long had it been before they could walk home side-by-side like this? In the beginning, Sousuke had kept his distance and it had felt like he was following behind her. Gradually- really, one day at a time, that distance had slowly narrowed, and before anyone knew it, it had become natural for them to walk next to each other. And when had it become so that their sleeves sometimes touched?

Suddenly, Sousuke opened his mouth and said, “Chidori.”

“What is it now?”

“Let’s hold hands.”

Kaname doubted what she had just heard.

“Huh... hands... what did you say?”

“I said let’s hold hands.”

What’s he doing? I don’t understand at all. Earlier he wouldn’t say a word, and now this all of the sudden? Something’s definitely strange. And-

“Do you not want to?”

“N... no, it’s not that I don’t want to...”

“Then it’s okay.”

Sousuke reached out with his right hand and softly took her left hand. Cautiously at first, then tightly. They had held hands many times before during emergencies, but never like this before.

“~~~uh...”

Her ears grew hot.

Kaname felt awkward, and unthinkingly buried her face in her scarf.

“I... I don’t understand. Why all of the sudden...”

“I don’t understand, either,” Sousuke said, pulling Kaname’s hand because of her stilted way of walking.

“This is kinda strange...”

“Strange? I guess so. It is strange.”

Neither of them said anything else after that.

There was a small yakitori shop ^{*2} on the outskirts of the shopping district. As they passed by it, they could hear a song coming from inside. “Yagiri no Watashi”^{*3}. It wasn’t the right mood, but for some reason it left a strong impression.

It was like they were engulfed in a sense of security.

His hand was large and warm. Yet at the same time, some kind of helpless feeling threw itself upon her. She didn’t know why.

The time after that passed before they knew it.

The two of them left the shopping district, getting closer to the apartments where they lived. The two buildings were separated by the main road. It was the same old scenery, but somehow even that looked different to her.

Normally, this is where they would break up and go to their own apartments, but- unlocking hands would be extremely lonely.

フルメタル・パニック!

つづくオン・マイ・オウン

千鳥。手をつなごう
唐突な言葉にかなめは耳が熱くなつた。



"Chidori. Let's hold hands." Kaname's ears turn hot at his sudden words.

“Umm... do you want to get something to eat?”

Even as she said it, she was surprised at herself. With this kind of atmosphere, wouldn't saying something like that be, well, dangerous?

Sousuke also seemed surprised.

“...would that be okay?”

“Uh... well, yeah. A kind of... end of everything wrap party, for today.”

“Wrap party?”

“Yeah. That kind of thing... is alright, I think.”

Sousuke gave a little nod, and after tightening his grip on her hand, they walked in the direction of Kaname's apartment.

They said nothing as they went up the elevator.

Because something might happen.

It was scary. But exciting.

It felt as if her world had shrunk. She could hear her heart pounding in her chest. She could feel the palm of his hand gradually becoming sweatier.

They walked down the common corridor.

And arrived in front of her place.

She floundered around with her keys so that she wouldn't have to let go of his hand.

“S-sorry.”

“It's okay. Maybe we should let go for a minute.”

“Y-yeah.”

She put the key in the hole, and opened the door.

They stepped into the entranceway. After slowly taking off their shoes, they once again joined hands, and getting close together, turned towards the living room.

Then at that moment- Sousuke moved.

He grabbed Kaname's shoulder and forcibly pulled her towards him, hidden behind his back, and withdrew his pistol from behind his hip. His entire body froze and tensed for a reason completely different from before.

“Huh...”

Finally, she realized why. In the middle of the darkness, a young man was sitting on her sofa.

He was wearing an all-black suit.

And he had flowing, silver hair.

The young man, Leonard Testarossa, looked as if he had grown tired of waiting, and stretched a little.

“Welcome home, Miss Kaname Chidori.”

His own carelessness- Sousuke couldn't think of anything but that.

How on earth did the silver-haired man leisurely sitting in Kaname's living room manage to sneak in?

Sousuke had set up numerous security systems and traps in order to sense, or possibly repulse, anyone who trespassed into Kaname's apartment. That meant that this guy had gotten past all of those.

No.

There wasn't a feeling of any kind of trouble like having to get past anything. This guy had a feeling more like, “I was inconvenienced because I had to turn the key”. Sousuke was overcome by such skill.

And, this guy.

Sousuke already knew this young man.

Leonard Testarossa.

He was the older brother of none other than his own commanding officer, Teletha Testarossa. He had encountered him when he had gone with Tessa to visit her parents' graves, and

Tessa told Sousuke about him on the way home. He worked for Amalgam, and was more than likely the designer of the enemy AS Codarl series, which had caused a lot of trouble for Sousuke and the others.

“Why was he here? What was he after?

“Why go to the trouble- of coming to Kaname’s apartment?

Despite the seething sensation welling up in his chest, Sousuke pointed his gun at Leonard. Using the laser sight, he aimed squarely at his chest.

“Don’t move. Slowly raise your hands and stand up. If you don’t follow these orders, I’ll-”

“Shoot me?”

Leonard shook his head wearily.

“The same old diplomatic courtesy. Let’s stop this. I don’t want to have to say the same thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“This.”

There was a slight movement on the balcony at the back of the living room. Sousuke’s sense of hearing and smell, as well as that sixth sense peculiar to a soldier, was just barely able to pick it up.

There were two of them.

Crouched down, and without completely lifting their heads, they slowly stirred. There was a slight indication- a feeling that they weren’t ordinary humans.

They were large. And they weren’t human.

Threats without any murderous intent at all. Machines.

An ambush with those robots...?

He hadn’t forgotten. It had been these robots, very small life-sized ASes, which had surrounded and fought them on the *Pacific Chrysalis*. They were called Alastors. They probably made

the slightest move at Leonard's will. It looked as if he could see through this and presuming that Sousuke knew about their existence, Leonard said, "You're nevertheless thinking that you can shoot me between the eyes before my 'guards' move, aren't you?"

"..."

"It's impossible, Sousuke Sagara. You seem to be quite an excellent assassin, but—"

Without listening to his opponent's words, Sousuke pulled the trigger without hesitation. Just as Leonard had said, Sousuke was an "excellent assassin". He wasn't going to take the time to listen to his enemy talk. He hadn't thought of anything except that he was Tessa's brother.

However, at the same time he shot, shadows jumped in front of Leonard's eyes. The bullets that should have hit him right in the middle of the head were scattered into sparks and disappeared. The black coat he was wearing had moved like a whip to stop the bullets.

"!?"

Was it a kind of shape memory polymer? Or some kind of "active" bulletproof clothing that could somehow instantly detect a moving object and respond? If so, what kind of firearms could it protect against? Would it work against hand grenade fragments? Fire? Impacts? Rifle bullets—

"Sousuke!?" Kaname yelled in a way that seemed to condemn him for shooting without listening. To Sousuke, her response was more surprising than the unknown bulletproof clothing.

"See? Even she thinks that was a bit rude," Leonard said, smiling. The smell of gunpowder drifted in the air. It felt like

Leonard was sneering at his and Kaname's relationship, and the back of his neck burned.

“I don't know why you're here, but I want you to get out of my apartment now.”

Leonard looked exaggeratedly wounded by Kaname's threatening attitude.

“The reason I'm here is to have a talk with you tonight. If it's okay with you, could you have your watchdog restrain himself a little?”

“I'll show you who's just a watchdog...”

His grip on the pistol tightened. He had already worked out his second and third move in his head based on the bulletproof clothing.

“Stop it, Sousuke.”

“This man is the enemy.”

“But he's Tessa's brother.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“Sousuke...!”

Why is she blaming me?

Sousuke's irritation was already growing.

“My sister is an unnecessary consideration. But what about bloodshed in this room?”

“...”

“I won't tell you to lower your gun. I just want you to hear me out.”

After a short silence, Sousuke said, “Speak.”

“Thank you, uhh... Sergeant Sagara, isn't it? I'm Leonard Testarossa.”

“I know who you are.”

“I see. Well then- Miss Kaname Chidori. My business is simple. Pack your bags and come with me to my place.”

Kaname was speechless for a bit.

“...what did you say?”

“I want you to throw away the life you have now and come with me. You don’t have to worry. Of course, since I guarantee your hospitable treatment, I promise you a prosperous life to do as you please. An institution has been prepared just to fulfill your intellectual interests, and first and foremost- it is completely safe.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”

“You don’t? And I thought that would be enough.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Fine, I’ll go into more detail.”

Leonard gave a little sigh. He swung the leg that was crossed over the other, and outside the window- he looked at something far off.

“My organization has become serious.”

Those words resounded in Sousuke’s head like the ones that Hayashimizu had said- “I don’t think you can carry on like this anymore”. Just like that time with Hayashimizu, Sousuke was attacked by an uncomfortable feeling from somewhere in his stomach.

“What do you mean?”

“Mithril has gone too far. Especially the Western Pacific fleet. Why don’t we name the machines of ours that you guys have destroyed so far? Seven Codarl types. One Behemoth type. Thirteen Alastor types. They’re stolen, but twelve Mistral 2s... when you think of it like this, it’s amazing. We’ve been completely taken by you guys.”

“...”

“And then there’s the *Pacific Chrysalis*. That was really bad. The value of that ship is no longer that high, but... even so, there was a lot of information that we handed over to you. Next

you'll be exposing the countries, businesses, terrorist organizations and mafias connected to Amalgam. If you did so, then it would be a great inconvenience."

"Of course it would. This 'inconvenience' will make you sorry."

"I told you that kind of attitude has been bad for you. Up until now, Amalgam hadn't placed much importance on the existence of Mithril. Since they knew roughly what it was comprised of from the start, they knew what it could and couldn't do. When that power grew, they thought about cutting off its branches through moderate measures."

"You mean the trap at Perio Islands?"

"That's right. Your submarine, the *Tuatha de Danaan*, has proved to be a rather efficient weapons system. It would be a meaningless piece of equipment in a regular army, but- well, when it comes to what Mithril is endowed with, one might say it's ideal. However, that white AS... umm? It's become the 'ARX-7', right?"

"There's no need to answer you," Sousuke said.

"Well, isn't just the name okay? Its nickname? It's the name of some mediaeval weapon, isn't it? The name of the failed 6 was called 'Halberd'."

"..."

Sousuke remained stubbornly silent.

"What a shame. It seems like you and I won't be able to be friends."

"If you plan on continuing this nonsense, then this conversation is through."

"I get it. Anyway, that's how it is. At Shun On and Ariake, the power you guys displayed was beyond my organization's expectations. Therefore, we tried to 'leave' you guys in a more ideal shape. When we thought we had finished it at the Perio

Islands, you guys managed to overcome it. There we were betrayed by our management. Mister Iron- or Gauron- caused the incident in Hong Kong by his own actions. Even our organization seemed confused by what happened there. Thanks to that, we lost six of our Codarl-type ASes. He was a man that caused trouble to the very end.”

“Did you know him?”

“A little. It seemed like he really liked you. He said he it pleased him incredibly to see you in Shun On.”

“Don’t mess with me.”

“But it’s the truth.”

Leonard’s eyes narrowed. He had the same, sweet smile as a girl. Sousuke could barely resist clicking his tongue. This man enjoyed irritating him. Earlier, he had made a face like he had only somehow remembered Sousuke’s name, but it was all in jest. He knew about Gauron, so it wasn’t like he wouldn’t at least know his name.

“Ahh, well... then there’s also the matter of that luxury boat. You guys finally took the initiative. It passed the stage of ‘leaving’ you guys in a more ideal shape to that of ‘restraint’. The conclusion drawn from that was simple. Crush the enemy. Snatch Job^{*4}.”

“Job...?”

“Her code name. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Wait a minute,” Kaname said, “in other words... you mean destroy Mithril, and take me?”

“That was the course decided just the other day,” Leonard nodded.

“We would just watch you for a while... was how it was until now, but it can’t be that way any longer. The organization doesn’t mind using rough measures, and is already thinking about

going ahead and securing you. You understand, right... what I mean when I say rough measures?"

It was obvious. It wouldn't be a roundabout way of doing things like it had been so far, but more direct- something that could shed blood depending on the situation.

"That's enough, isn't it? My explanation as to why I've gone to all this trouble to bring you back like this?"

"You came to persuade me in advance, then...?"

"Yes, because I love you."

Now Leonard gave her an angelic smile. Sousuke felt the urge to fill that smiling face, which totally disregarded his own existence, with bullets.

"You damn insolent..."

"Wait, Sousuke."

"Why?"

"Just wait, okay!" her voice smacked into him, and his index finger stopped from pulling the trigger. As Kaname softly pushed the tip of his gun down, she said in a calm voice to Leonard, "...I understand, and I thank you for your kindness. But since I have school, I like the life I have now. Furthermore, there's no way I could go with you. I've said it I don't know how many times before, but I hate you."

"Chidori...?"

"So, hurry up and get out of my room!" she said without even responding to Sousuke. Leonard sat there expressionless for a little bit, then finally gave a little shrug and slowly stood up.

"That's cold."

"Of course it is."

"Are you still upset about that?"

"U..."

"Even though I told you to forgive me."

“Did you not hear me? Get out!” Kaname yelled as her face turned red. As he listened to this exchange, Sousuke was still confused about a completely different meaning.

About that? Forgive him?

What were they talking about?

“I’ll only say it once more.”

Leonard turned his back to them. He gave a light wave of his right hand, and the Alastors hidden on the balcony slowly got up.

“Why don’t you just accept it? You’re one of the chosen; already greater than a genius. And yet people can only think to use us by deceitful flattery. Is it your wish to be pushed around by them?”

“Stop it.”

“You should have noticed it by now. The stupid things the people around you do out of hopeless stupidity.”

“Get out.”

“Their slowness really grates on you, doesn’t it?”

“Get out!!” Kaname yelled, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Very well, then. I warned you. I don’t want you to blame me for what happens after this... oh, and Mr. Sagara,” Leonard turned back around after opening the glass door to the balcony. “Earlier, while I was waiting for you guys, I watched the news to kill some time. It said on there that they had caught a man suspected of being a mass murderer in England. It seems he killed 35 people.”

“What about it?”

“Well, from my simple investigation, you’ve killed more than three times that many people.”

“...!”

Kaname held her breath and shuddered.

“I wonder why. Despite this, a lot of people still like you. So does she. Someone like you, who’s killed more than a hundred people. I wonder if everyone would still hang around you if they knew that... I don’t think it’s fair.”

It was a dirty trick filled with malice- leaving something regretful and complex, Leonard disappeared from the room.

For a while, the two of them just stood in the pitch-dark living room. Kaname’s shoulders were trembling slightly. Unable to leave her unsupported figure alone, Souseki reached out and softly touched her back.

“Chidori...”

“!”

She suddenly jerked her upper body away. A moment later, she stared at Souseki as if she were looking at a monster. Then she shook her head a little, and forcing a laugh, said, “Uh... I’m sorry. I-I’m alright, okay? Umm... why don’t we just forget about what that guy said, okay?”

“No...”

Souseki couldn’t say anything else after that.



At the command center of the base on Merida Island, Lieutenant Commander Andrei Kalinin received the report from Souseki and soon replied, “Understood. Do what you can to hold out until tomorrow morning. We’ll send out a transport helicopter.”

Kaname would be much safer if they transferred her from Tokyo to the Merida Island base- was what Souseki judged, and therefore made the request to do so. She also reluctantly agreed with him.

“Tomorrow morning?” Sousuke said, his voice tinged with anger. “If you use the prescribed route, you should be able to pick us up faster. If you take into consideration how that guy Leonard was able to break through our defenses, then-”

“That’s precisely the reason, Sergeant. It’s better that we don’t use the escape plan that we prepared. We have to allow that they’ve anticipated everything.”

“I see...”

“And you’re SRT. That in and of itself is enough provision, isn’t it? Use it.”

It wouldn’t be as if Sousuke had been idly passing his time in Tokyo. Without permission from Mithril, he had probably used his own channels to prepare several vehicles and disguised weapons vehicles, a safe house in which to hide, false permits and identification papers. Any SRT mercenary would have done so. They specifically wouldn’t ask about it; Kurz and Mao had probably done the same.

You protected yourself.

The organization was, after all, only a tool. Loyalty was important, but you couldn’t rely on them.

“Understood. I will try.”

“You know this already, but be very careful about being followed. As far as the girl goes, after you return, the Captain will have a talk with her.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“After this we will keep correspondence to a minimum. That is all.”

After Kalinin had ended the transmission, Tessa- Captain Teletha Testarossa, who had been listening to the conversation in silence, sighed.

As usual, she was in her uniform and her ash blonde hair was in a braid. She had a look of deep concern on her brow.

“I thought that a time like this might come, but... this is somewhat beyond my expectations.”

Kalinin nodded.

“I understand, Captain. However, there should be understood measures.”

“You’re right. I wanted to go ahead and respect her wishes.”

“...”

“Besides... I don’t understand what he’s thinking.”

Tessa’s older twin brother, expressly showing up in Kaname’s room- and his telling her, “Come with me”, was more than a little astonishing. What kind of margin was there? It was possible that the enemy wasn’t monolithic, but she could believe that they were laying some kind of trap.

That’s not it. There shouldn’t be such a thing...

That was it.

Her brother was seriously trying to get his hands on Kaname. Not just her body, but her heart as well. Since he was motivated to do just that, he thought he would be able to. It looked incredibly foolish from Tessa’s point of view, but he didn’t see it that way. Her own attempts at meddling with those two- what boiled down to her own make-believe love-affair, even more than that, what her brother was trying to do had even more of a serious and dim feeling about it.

Would a transport helicopter be enough? This was her brother they were talking about. Wouldn’t he simply think that they would pick the two of them up and take them away? For example, even if he had planned on leaving them be, he should be able to easily read their intentions. There was no guarantee that he wouldn’t tell this to his organization’s detached forces.

“We’ll send the Arbalest with them,” Tessa said, and Kalinin raised his eyebrow.

“Why? This is only a secretive operation to pick the two of them up-”

“Just in case this situation goes bad.”

“...”

“If something were to happen, wouldn’t it be safer to have an AS to secure the landing zone? The enemy has those robots- the Alastors.”

“An M9 would be sufficient for that.”

“They would also think the same thing, so it’s possible that the enemy has prepared those Codarls.”

“In the city?”

“Isn’t that what an AS equipped with ECS invisibility is for? In any case, without Sergeant Sagara, the Arbalest is nothing more than an ordinary M9. There’s no point if it’s unwilling.”

Kalinin seemed a little hesitant, but soon nodded his head.

“Understood. If we do, it will be necessary to refuel mid-flight. Your permission for takeoff?”

“Of course. Please hurry.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He nimbly gave the necessary instructions to his subordinates in the command center. When he finished that, Tessa mumbled, “Mr. Sagara said, ‘The enemy’s gotten serious’, didn’t he? Should we try and hurry?”

“I don’t know, but there are grounds to. We’ve taken enough action to upset them.”

“That’s true. However-”

Tessa waved the tip of her braid over the end of her nose.

“This enemy might be the type to try and put an end to that.”

Translator's Notes:

1. The Tepodan was a short-range missile in Korea.
2. Yakitori is grilled meat- a customer can get all kinds of grilled meat or vegetables on a stick at a place like this.
3. "Yagiri Ferry". A ferryboat that has been crossing back and forth from Shibamata to Shimoyagiri on the banks of the Edogawa River for more than 380 years since the beginning of Edo era. In the hit song "Yagiri no Watashi", a couple in impermissible love in Edo, embark from Shibamata on a cold rainy evening for anywhere they can marry and live together.
4. As in the biblical figure Job.

Chapter 2: Heat

Sydney was very hot that morning.

The head of Mithril's Operations Department, Admiral Jerome Borda, dressed in his usual suit, was on his way to work in a sedan driven by a guard from Operations Headquarters, and had to ask the driver to turn the air conditioner up on high mid-route. Out of security habits, the commuting time and routes were changed randomly from day to day. The sedan was made of the newest bulletproof materials that could withstand even a direct hit from an anti-tank rocket.

While he scanned over the regular reports in the car, Admiral Borda's sedan entered one of the buildings in midtown. Officially, it was the main office of the Argyros security firm, but this building was the Operations Headquarters for Mithril. The communications facilities and intelligence agencies that unified and managed the various units around the world were located in this building.

The security was very strict for that reason.

If someone had serious intentions of trying to break in, even a company of infantrymen, they had better be prepared to stand out in front of the gate for more than 30 minutes while they were baptized by large bullets, personal land mines, and a number of other devices. After finishing with the troublesome procedures, Borda got out of the car in the parking lot, and met up with one of the management personnel, Captain Wagner, just as he was coming into work.

“Good morning, Sir.”

He was an American under 50 years old. He wore an eye patch and had a peculiar way of dragging his right leg when he

walked, quite like the Captain of a pirate ship. Borda had heard that it was from an injury during his regular army days.

“Good morning, Captain. It’s rather hot this morning, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Sir. We’ll run a complete inspection of the air conditioning system.”

“It was just a comment. Speaking of which- what’s going on with Jackson?”

“We filed the results of the interrogation three weeks ago.”

“Him personally.”

“He’s still in the hospital. They were rather inhumane measures.”

The two of them got on the elevator and headed to the upper floors.

When they were alone, Borda said, “We have it about 80% figured out. We can’t make any conclusions yet- but it seems that the Geotron Company is also in bad shape.”

“Yes...”

He could guess its meaning. Wagner tensed up a little.

“Amit’s been acting funny. We should handle their reports with that in mind.”

“You don’t think the General is...?”

“I don’t know. Since Sir Mallory’s the same as ever, it might be time for us to finally pull out of here. However, at present, this place is probably okay. That’s why we have to put up with the warm reception of these security procedures every day.”

“Yes- they can’t easily reach us unless they use bomber planes.”

The elevator reached the 26th floor.



There were already several members of the Headquarters' staff at work in the command center, which took up two floors. The room was dim, as there were absolutely no windows at all. Instead, there was an extra-large display light, which dully lit the room. It was as if they had enlarged the battle information center of an Aegis class destroyer.

“Things are going to get a lot busier around her, Captain,” Borda said to Wagner, returning the salutes of his subordinates as they walked along.

“The enemy’s command systems are completely different from anything we’ve seen. If they aren’t, then we shouldn’t keep falling behind like we have. Normal intelligence networks and weapons are powerless before them. Or it may be just as Tessa said-”

Just then, the room was hit by a violent impact.

There was some kind of enormous explosion. The walls blew out, screens and machinery were blown to bits, flames flew up, and people he was acquainted with were torn to pieces; all of it collected together to become a wall of death rushing towards him.

Jerome Borda knew nothing after that.



It was already morning, but he hadn’t slept.

Clutching his familiar submachine gun, Sousuke filled the driver’s seat of a light van.

They were in a parking lot adjoined to a large park located in north Choufu-shi. The grounds were quiet, with cars parked sparsely around the area. The inside of the van was very cold because he had turned the engine off.

Last night, after such an invasion of privacy had been allowed, they of course didn't have the courage to hang around at Kaname's apartment. Just as Kalinin had pointed out, Sousuke had prepared emergency provisions by his own personal channels. After contacting Merida Island, they briefly packed some bags, got into the already-prepared vehicle and left. They thoroughly removed the possibility of anyone following them by using the metropolitan expressway, and even changed vehicles twice.

They should be safe for the moment.

They hadn't been able to make contact with the "other guard" from Mithril's Intelligence Department, code name "Wraith", since the night before. It wasn't as if Wraith would miss Leonard breaking into Kaname's apartment, but- no, more than likely, he had been "incapacitated" during that time. Either way, Sousuke couldn't depend on that agent. For several months now, whenever he needed to be absent, a PRT personnel member from the *Tuatha de Danaan* would come and switch out with him.

"Mm..."

He sensed Kaname move in the backseat. She was curled up in an outdoor blanket.

"What time is it?"

"Before eight. Did you get some sleep?"

"Yeah..."

Kaname rubbed her eyes as she slowly sat up. She was still wearing her school uniform from the day before.

"I want a bath..."

"You can't have one."

"What about breakfast?"

"Here."

Sousuke took a Calorie Mate out of his pocket and tossed it easily behind him.

“Wait a se...”

“I put some milk and vegetable juice in there, so go ahead and drink something. This might turn into a physical battle.”

“But there’s a helicopter coming for us, right?”

“Yes, but just in case.”

The transport helicopter dispatched by Mithril should make a direct landing in this parking lot. The established rendezvous point- this avoided the Choufu airport, the campuses of several school, and the grounds which bordered the Tamagawa river.

The communication he received several hours ago reported that the helicopter would be carrying the Arbalest. Tessa had arranged it. Since it was only there for a worst-case scenario, there probably wouldn’t be any chance to use it. Otherwise, there would be a problem.

“Hey, I’m going to change, so could you not look back here?”

“Okay,” Sousuke said, bending the back mirror. He could hear her rummaging through her clothes behind him.

“...but this is a problem. I don’t really have any changes of clothes. And I’m worried about my hamster’s food. And I don’t know if I shut the air conditioner off.”

She spoke as if she would be able to return to her apartment after a few days like she had the times before.

“I’ll be able to come back again, right?” she said, her voice clouded with anxiety when she noticed Sousuke’s unusual silence.

“That’s...”

“What?”

“Never mind...”

He didn’t have the courage to tell her the truth.

The conversation he had with Atsunobu Hayashimizu the day before. Sousuke knew very well that they had already reached that point.

For the past nine months, Mithril had made secret arrangements here and there to protect her social situation. Using ingenious intelligence operations, pressure and bribery with the appearance of morality to draw out voluntary restraint, they had easily kept the mass media and those connected with the local government silent.

Mithril's AI system continued to spread false information on the internet.

If someone wrote "This is a conspiracy" with a fairly accurate basis, it would reply "There's another conspiracy nut" while pretending to be another person who would overreact. It moderately spread verbal disputes and slander, murking up people's concerns and points. In the end, probably only one person in a hundred didn't miss the more important points. If that sagacious person presented a question, the AI would skillfully change the pattern, and repeat the same thing. Humans get tired, but the AI basically never tires. And before any conclusion is reached, "the problem girl" would disappear behind the veil of dim imagination. What was left in the memories of most people was just "yeah, there's that rumor, too".

This wasn't just limited to Mithril, who was just one member in the information war waged by the secret intelligence agencies of every country and corporate giants. If organizations with big budgets used their talented people and equipment, it wasn't that difficult.

But even this had its limits. From the level of macroscopic society, Kaname was just your typical individual. However, in a school of just 1200 people, with stress, bribery, and information

you couldn't really expect results. That was because you relied on their simplicity and naiveté. Hayashimizu's words were the "feelings" of a person who commanded a view of the people at school.

Was there a reasonable way to turn Kaname back into someone of no value to the enemy?

Unless there was, there would be no way for her to live a proper life after this. Sousuke had thought about that for a long time.

For example...

What if Kaname reported everything she knew, then presented it to everyone around the world under a false name? Then it wouldn't be her that was important, but the technology information it was said that she possessed. After the Hong Kong incident, Sousuke tried suggesting this to Tessa. When he did, she gave him a terribly mournful yet mysterious smile, and said:

"Mr. Sagara, don't you think that someone's tried that already...?"

Tessa didn't tell him any details, but said that the results of the experiment were useless. If you present a small gold nugget to those who are mining gold and say, "This is it. There's no more"- they wouldn't throw away their hovels or pickaxes.

In other words, the Whispered weren't the lucky ones who had struck "gold".

Because essentially, they were the "gold".

It wasn't a gift. It was a curse.

There was no way to escape this fate.

No way at all.

How in the world could he tell her such a harsh truth?

He gradually tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"Chidori..."

The day before, right before he had said, “Let’s hold hands” to Kaname on the way home, Sousuke had endeavored to tell her the words that couldn’t say at all.

-let’s throw everything away, and run away together.

It doesn’t matter what happens. Let’s go to a place where no one knows us, change our names and live a quiet life. It doesn’t matter if we’re poor. We don’t need money. If food becomes a problem, we’ll steal it. If something happens in the world, we’ll plug our ears and go on with our lives. One day we’ll be able to settle down with true meaning. And you and I can live in peace-Totgerher-

Just then, Leonard’s words resurfaced.

“You’ve killed more than three times that many people”

“Someone like you, who’s killed more than a hundred people”

“I don’t think it’s fair”

It was true.

It hadn’t just been during regular battle. He had shot enemies who were crying and running away in the back, and blown up trucks filled with anxious new recruits. He’d also shot prisoners pleading for their life to conceal the traces of his group.

It wasn’t as if he had done it for fun. It had just been necessary.

But it was the truth.

And it wasn’t as if the past nine months he had spent in Tokyo reflected only his virtuous qualities. He had been made aware of just how bloodstained and tainted his life had been.

Was there someone out there who would love someone like him? Was he even worthy of running away with her?

Much less peacefully.

He must seem like a monster to her.

“...what is it?”

“Never mind.”

He couldn’t say anything in the end.

He felt a deep gulf.

Nothing had changed since then. It was still like when they were in the mountains of North Korea nine months earlier-

Lost in the dark, and in the rain.

“Okay, then...”

It seemed that Kaname was finished changing. With her permission, he adjusted the back mirror, and saw her, now wearing plain clothes, turn the cap off the vegetable juice.

“It’s quiet, isn’t it... can we turn on the radio?”

“Yeah.”

Turning the volume down to a moderate level, he turned on the FM radio.

There was a gloomy, melancholic duet playing. Without even suggesting they change the station, she nibbled on her Calorie Mate silently until the end of the song.

“...alright, what a nice song. That was Peter Gabriel’s ‘Mercy Street’,” the male DJ said in a calm voice. “...we have another song in store for you, but... eeh, we’ve just received some breaking news. Let’s go to Miss Kobayashi in the news center.”

It switched to a female newscaster.

“Hello, Kobayashi here. There has just been a large explosion in midtown Sydney, Australia. According to a quick announcement we’ve received from the Associated Press, today at around 7:30 Japan Time there was the sound of a loud explosion, and flames rising from the vicinity of a 25 story building. We don’t have information about casualties at this time. The building is... uh, the headquarters of the Argyros security company, but we don’t know if this was an accident or an act of terrorism at this

time. We also don't have any news as to whether or not there were any Japanese citizens registered at that company-”

The Argyros Building- Mithril's Operations Headquarters?

Sousuke immediately took out his portable terminal, and brought up the television broadcast.

It was a picture of the morning office district. Smoke was pouring from one of the buildings. The images were being taken from the roof of another building somewhere. At a glance, it looked like some kind of explosive from the outside- more than likely a half-ton bomb had been dropped on it. Several of them.

Despite its many security systems, Operations Headquarters had been destroyed. Had it been hit by a bomb with a GPS system from high altitude and from a long distance?

“What's this...” Kaname, who was leaning over the back seat to look at the terminal screen, said in a shaking voice.

Using his satellite communication equipment, Sousuke made contact with the Merida Island base. A female officer in the command center replied.

“What's the situation?”

“We don't know, only that Operations Headquarters has been bombed. We can't make contact with them,” she said in a nervous voice. It seemed that she knew what had happened in Sydney. “But that's not all. We've lost contact with the bases of the Mediterranean and South Atlantic squadrons... and we received a warning from the Indian Ocean squadron's base just five minutes ago, saying that there were a number of cruise missiles headed their way-”

For a moment, the transmission was filled with static. Then it came back.

“Is everything alright?”

“...answer me, Uruz 7... yeah, we’re fine. It seems that there’s some electro-magnetic interference. E-line and D-line are also... ahh, what’s happening?”

“Shinohara?”

“Sorry. I can’t reach the Lieutenant Commander or the Captain. Here’s Lieutenant Clouseau-” There was a little clicking sound.

“It just switched over. It’s me, Sergeant,” said a man’s voice. It was the commanding officer of the SRT, Ben Clouseau.

“Lieutenant.”

“We still don’t know what the situation is yet. It seems that the other squad bases are under attack. We’ve also been put on alert. It’s hard to imagine, but this is an all-out attack. We don’t know what will happen.”

“All-out attack?”

“You know what I mean. We can’t let them do as they please. You’re to link up with Gebo 9 as planned and get back here as soon as possible. No...” Clouseau hesitated on the other end of the line.

“Cancel that. You won’t make it now. Stay on standby. After you meet up with the helicopter, wait for us to contact you at point Romeo 13.”

They wouldn’t make it in time. They were probably fighting for every minute, every second at the base. Even going at top speed, it would still take six hours to get there. Then it would be pointless. However, it was riskier to make the incredible reserved strength of “Sousuke Sagara and the Arbalest” wait at inter-calculated point Romeo 13- a small estate in the Bonin Islands.

“Got it, Sergeant? Protect the Arbalest at all costs. Angel, too.”

“Roger. Also, Lieutenant, I told this to Lieutenant Commander Kalinin last night, but they’re serious now. Be careful.”

The noise got stronger.

“You told the Lieutenant Commander what?”

“I said that they’re ser-”

“Can you hear me, Uruz 7!? Please repeat-”

The noise grew extremely loud, and then the transmission was cut off.

“...”

Silence. Kaname stared anxiously at the profile of Sousuke’s face as he furrowed his brow.

All-out attack? Seriously?

Setting aside the Operations Headquarters in the middle of the city, the other Mithril bases were basically impregnable fortresses. They would be unperturbed by a few bombs. Even getting near them with any kind of bomber was difficult to start with. Furthermore, there was their military force, equipment, training exercises, emergency stores, and reconnaissance abilities. If it really was their intent to take down Merida Island, then they needed an entire marine regiment. And if they moved a military force that size, there’s no way that Mithril wouldn’t notice it.

No...

If they had ASES equipped with Lambda Drivers. If they had such superior technology.

Think about it. The enemy was even jamming Mithril’s communication network, right? But was such electro-magnetic interference really possible?

“What’s happening...?” Kaname asked in a restrained voice, as if she were touching a sore spot.

“We’re not going to Merida Island.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen there. It’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous... what d’you mean?”

Sousuke didn’t have time to answer before another call sound came from the FM radio. It was from the all-purpose helicopter sent by the Western Pacific Fleet to pick them up- the MH-67, call-sign “Gebo 9”.

They were able to pick it up digitally, but the signal was fairly weak. No- it wasn’t that. The television images were messed up, as well. Everything was full of static. Was there strong electromagnetic interference throughout the entire neighborhood? Or was it an even larger area than that?

“This is Uruz 7. The landing zone is secure.”

“Uruz 7. Gebo 9 is presently passing over the outskirts of Atsugi. Please continue to secure the landing zone,” a woman’s voice said through the noise. It was Lieutenant Eva Santos of the flight unit. She had taken care of them countless times. To her “passengers” Sousuke and Kaname, her voice was just like that of a singing angel.

“Uruz 7, roger. The landing zone is...”

Then Sousuke faltered.

A cold chill ran up his spine.

“The landing zone...”

Looking very carefully out of the van window, Sousuke tightened his grip on his submachine gun. With his left hand, which was holding the radio, he slowly gestured to Kaname to “get down”.

“What’s wrong, Uruz 7?”

“...Gebo 9. We are currently surrounded. By at least five of those Alastor type robots. I also detect foot soldiers armed with assault rifles... four... five... six... there are at least eight of them.

They are about 80 meters away, concealed in a thicket in the northeast.”

“Damn it all to hell. It’s not just Merida Island, they’re here, too...”

“Please hurry.”

“Gebo 9, roger. Try to hold out, Sousuke!”

“We’ll try.”

Sousuke clicked the safety off of his submachine gun. At the very least, it was thirteen to one; and if you thought about general tactics, there were probably more.

Can I do this...?

Probably not.

But there was no other choice.

“Sousuke...?”

“I’m sorry, Chidori,” Sousuke muttered, “but it looks like it’s going to be a long five minutes.”

The enemy closed in on Sousuke and Kaname, who were sitting in a van in a parking lot. As far as they could tell, there were more than 13 of them. And half of them were those robots. Even if the numbers were fair, he didn’t have the power to beat them.

“Lie down in the seat, and don’t raise up for anything,” Sousuke said to Kaname, who was sitting in the back seat with an anxious look on her face.

“What do you mean-”

“Aren’t you listening? The enemy is here, we have to escape.”

Sousuke turned the key and threw himself across the passenger seat.

Just then there were gunshots. There was a sharp noise as radial cracks ran through the bulletproof front windshield. Just as expected, a sniper had aimed at the driver. The enemy wasn’t

stupid. The bullets that penetrated the bulletproof glass had torn up the headrest where Sousuke's head had been only a few moments before.

“Ah!!”

Kaname let out a short scream as she was showered by pieces of sponge and fake leather in the back seat.

“Keep down!”

Still keeping down, Sousuke put the van in gear, stepped on the throttle and quickly took off. He had warmed up the engine every couple hours during the night, because it had become that hard to start it. The tires smoked, and the van slid a little on the road. Several more shots came from another direction, hitting the driver's side door and hood. Thick metallic sounds struck the body in succession.

Cutting the wheel as he got up, Sousuke turned the van away from the parking lot exit. It was obvious that the enemy would be waiting to ambush them from there.

As they went along, they were sprayed by machine gun fire from the right. The enemy was aiming at the chassis. Sousuke could tell right away from the sounds of the gunfire that they were using 5.56mm German-made machine guns. That was okay; they couldn't puncture the bulletproof tires with those caliber bullets. The van accelerated. They rushed at the wire fence at the back of the parking lot.

Three shadows jumped out in front of them. They were giants wearing black trench coats.

Alastors.

The robots aimed their arm rifles at the van. Sousuke turned the high beams on and plunged forward. The enemies didn't flinch. They were different from humans. They accurately shot at the driver's seat, causing the windshield to turn pure white.

Sousuke bent down to dodge the line of fire, then stepped once again on the throttle. The three enemy robots were close.

Crash.

“Hya...” Kaname’s body was tossed around in the back seat. One of the Alastors went flying to the left. But the two remaining Alastors were using their superhuman strength and stamina to hang on to the body of the van. One was on the hood, and the other was next to the passenger side door- in other words, right in front of their eyes.

It wasn’t as if he could stop. If he did for even just a little bit, everything would be over.

Sousuke fought for control of the steering as it went wild, then used force to drive into the fence. There was an ear-shattering noise and blinding sparks. The van heaved up and down violently, but the Alastors weren’t thrown off. The van skidded along, dragging the wire fence it had hit with it.

Before they even had time to catch their breath, they were running along the street that had suddenly appeared in front of them. The van accelerated for a second time.

The enemy on the passenger’s side started to fire its rifle into the bulletproof glass from point-blank range. Fragments flew all over the place as the glass was instantly pulverized. The enemy on the hood swung its fist, and with tremendous power, beat the hell out of the front windshield. After the glass, the driver would be next-

As Sousuke sped up, he cut the wheel to the left side of the street- up against the block wall around a house. The Alastor on the passenger side was crunched in between, yet continued to hold onto the window frame without letting go. Remaining completely expressionless, it tried to attack Sousuke.

The van pulled away from the wall. Adding momentum, Sousuke hit again. The Alastor was thrown off like a snapped rubber band and hit the pavement.

“Sousuke, in front of you!!”

There was no time to relax. Kaname’s shouting made Sousuke face front, where he saw the other Alastor break through the windshield and try to reach for his chest. No, it wasn’t trying to grab him. It was already pointing its arm rifle straight at Sousuke’s head.

“Uh...”

He slammed on the brakes. The van was thrown forward, messing up the enemy’s positioning. Then there was a glaring shot in front of Sousuke’s eyes. The bullet just barely missed his head.

He’d been able to shut his eyes, but the shot from point-blank range- a sound almost like a shock wave- had blasted in his right ear. A piiiiing sound rang in his ear, his sense of balance was off, and the smoke made it temporarily impossible to see anything. His head was spinning.

“It’s still in front of you!”

Sousuke relied on Kaname’s voice. He fumbled around until he grabbed the submachine gun on the passenger’s seat, then fired on full auto at the enemy. The Alastor was thrown back again, but it didn’t go away. He aimed at what appeared to be his opponent’s wrist and emptied the rest of his cartridge. Fragments were flying around inside the van, and Sousuke felt a thick pain run up his left arm.

He tore the wrist apart.

When he wiped his watering eyes and looked ahead, he saw the Alastor in danger of regaining its balance on the hood. He turned the wheel wide right, then left. The enemy was unable to withstand this and was thrown off.

He accelerated quickly. The gears were making strange noises. He tried to check behind him, but there wasn't a rearview mirror anymore.

“Are you hurt, Chidori!?” Sōsuke yelled over the blowing wind. He couldn't hear much of anything out of his right ear.

“I'm... alright.”

There was no time to confirm it, because now there was a black sedan following them. When Sōsuke tried to turn right at a crossroads, his hand slipped off the steering wheel. It was his blood. His left arm below the elbow was soaked in it. A piece of metal about the size of a ticket was stuck in his arm. He wasn't shocked. Experience told him, “You can still move”. He'd treat it later.

He ran through a red light as he used one hand to change the magazine of his submachine gun. He very nearly ran over an office lady on her way to work.

“Sōsuke!?”

“If we stop we're done for!”

“...but...”

“Didn't you hear what I said?! Stay down!”

Gan! Bullets hit the van. The pursuing vehicle was shooting at them. Even though it was morning in the town area, the enemy didn't care.

“Sh-should I shoot?”

“No,” Sōsuke rejected her promptly. “You're not to shoot.”

“Oh... but why-”

“You're not going to touch a gun!”

She hadn't had any training, so it wasn't like she could hit anything.

Also, she shouldn't have a gun.

She couldn't have a gun.



Communication lines with Indian Ocean squad were also completely cut. The officer in charge tried every means she could think of. She even tried using civilian phone lines, but that didn't work, either.

“This isn't just regular electro-magnetic inference. We can't use the business satellite circuits, either... what is this?” muttered Tessa, who was sitting in the squad leader's chair in the Merida Island command center. She hadn't changed from the night before because she had been on standby the whole time with only a nap. Even though she was properly dressed in her usual uniform, she was incredibly worn out.

She was worried about Admiral Borda, whom she adored like her own uncle, but for now, she couldn't even mention such worries. The same with Sousuke and Kaname, as well.

“It's happening on a global scale, Captain,” Sergeant Shinohara, who was in charge of communications, said as she hurriedly pecked at the panel. “Most if the spy satellites, including Sting, are out of use. And not just ours. Business satellites are of course down, but so are Navstar, Comstar, the Keyhole series; even the American military satellites have received damage. Those stations that were reporting on the Sydney incident stopped transmitting a few minutes ago.”

Tessa clenched her teeth.

“A solar wind. But that's an extremely small scale.”

Storms of electromagnetic waves emitted from the sun—those were solar winds. When sunspot activity became particularly lively, occasionally large-scale electromagnetic radiation would rain incessantly down on the earth. These days, they routinely

released “storm warnings” for predicting increases in sunspot activity by observing the sun. Because of advances in protective measures, in most situations, those electromagnetic waves had very little effect and caused little malfunction in manmade satellites or ground technology.

Something like an earthquake, for example. And no more than just a small one.

However, every once in a while, a “major earthquake” happens.

It’s impossible to accurately predict a major earthquake. You can infer as to the likelihood and endeavor to reduce the risk, but you won’t know exactly when it will happen. It was like large dips in the stock market, or a large-scale epidemic.

In the case that the earth was hit by an incredible solar wind, the damage caused would be comparable with the electromagnetic pulse of a nuclear explosion. There would be little effect on the human body, but it would deal a great deal of damage to precise electronic equipment. Even cable communications wouldn’t be an exception.

Restoration was possible, of course. With just a little time, the malfunctions and difficulties would improve.

Nevertheless, this degree of damage would take time.

“Most of the long distance communications which use satellite circuits and the ionosphere, without regards to those for military or business use, are not functional at present. VHF and ELF are alive, but... there’s still an outbreak of downed servers on the internet, and a vicious cycle of confusion and overloading. There’s mayhem in the military and business flight controls from the west coast of the US to the west banks of the Indian Ocean. They will be restored, but this kind of solar activity has never been observed before-”

“Solar winds aren’t the problem,” said Tessa’s second-in-command, Commander Richard Mardukas. He was always a hard-to-please man, but now he was even more tense than usual.

“I’ve had experience with trouble like this. During this kind of disaster, enemies as well as allies would not be fighting. However, our enemy has taken advantage of this. That’s the problem.”

An unpredictable “major earthquake of electromagnetic waves”.

More than it working out for the enemy, each of Mithril’s bases were under attack.

“Even if the enemy has abilities of that magnitude- the gamble would be too risky. What do you think, Lieutenant Commander?” Mardukas asked Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, who was discussing the base’s warning systems with Lieutenant Clouseau of the SRT (Special Response Team).

“Ah...”

Kalinin turned around. After staying silent for a moment, and without any facial expression, he shook his head side to side.

“Now... we just have warnings.”

“I know that. What’s your opinion?”

“I don’t know. I-”

Tessa raised her eyebrows at Kalinin’s very unusual behavior.

“Lieutenant Commander?”

“No. In any case, if the enemy is coming, it will be soon. We gave orders to all of the available multi-purpose helicopters to go on patrol. Antiaircraft equipment will also be necessary. Five of the AV-8’s equipped with AMRAAM are-”

Just then, the officer in charge of the antiaircraft warning system yelled out, “Super high-speed cruise missiles are coming.

There are eight of them. Zone D4. Distance, 70 miles. Mach 6.3. Estimated time till impact-”

“65 seconds. An ambush. Sound the first alarm. Have everyone in the above ground observatory take shelter,” Tessa ordered immediately. The chilling tone of the air-raid alarm sirens, which had never been used outside of training, resounded loudly throughout the area. The lights in the command center turned red, and the words “Red Alert 1” ran continuously across the screens.

“Air traffic control. Abandon Gebo 6 on the runway and take shelter along with the surrounding ground crew.”

“Ro-roger. Gebo 5 is currently land-”

“Have them make an emergency takeoff, and go as high as they can.”

“Roger.”

Even as Tessa was giving orders, the bright points on the screen- the super high-speed missiles, drew closer to Merida Island.

The Tomahawk cruise missiles that traveled at subsonic speeds were already 1st generation weapons. The new, up-and-coming Fasthawks attacked by closing in from high altitudes at ultra high-speed- at devastatingly high speeds. They probably wouldn’t be able to protect the base with their own antimissile missiles. If the warning radar didn’t drop below half-efficiency, there might have still been measures to take.

However, Tessa wasn’t given the time to be surprised by the fact that the enemy possessed such equipment or to complain about their own handicap. All she was permitted to do right now was save the personnel she could save, and try to curb as much damage as possible.

<-Warning. Multiple high-speed missiles are approaching this base. All above-ground personnel, discontinue your work and

evacuate to the underground zones. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill-> the AI announced neutrally.

Including the command center, most of the facilities on the Merida Island base had been constructed underground. It was a structure modeled on the Gremikha Base on the Soviet Commonwealth's Kola Peninsula, which made use of Typhoon-class submarines.

While Tessa handed down detailed orders, Merida Island's anti-aircraft missiles were fired to intercept the enemy missiles. There was no image or sound. The points of green light indicated on the screen were just figures getting closer to the enemy missiles at a strong speed.

It would probably be an enormous endeavor. In a dry, composed voice, the deck officer reported, "Three targets successfully intercepted. The remaining missiles are still approaching."

Another officer then said, "A second wave of enemy missiles detected in zone E4. There are nine to twelve of them. Distance 85-"

"Fire all missiles."

"Roger. BOL firing six through nine."

All of the remaining missiles they could fire shot out of missile launchers from various places around the island. There was no reason to be hesitant. The impact from the first wave would probably destroy most of the above ground intercept systems.

"Fi... First wave, five seconds to impact."

"Calm down," Tessa said with a light sigh, leaning back against her seat. She had a dignity about her that not even a veteran commander could match.

"The core of it will be a moment."

The bright dots on the screen piled up on Merida Island.

And for the first time- the first, real time, the command center was hit by the impact of war.



The black sedan moved right beside the van.

Impact.

Hitting with all its might, the sedan almost caused the van to go into a spin. Holding down the struggling wheel with one hand, Sousuke pointed his submachine gun out the window.

He shot.

The armor piercing ammunition poured against the driver's side of the pursuing vehicle, filling the bulletproof glass with holes. The enemy also shot. Sousuke got the better of the enemy fire by using the emergency brakes as he emptied the remaining bullets in his magazine.

A spray of blood from the driver splattered inside of the enemy vehicle. The black sedan rocked heavily, and seemed to retreat from view. But just then, the enemy moved to avoid hitting the shoulder of the road, and collided into the rear right side of the van.

Kaname screamed out.

Sousuke calmly countered, trying to somehow recover from the hit. It wasn't enough. There was a slow truck directly in front of him that he couldn't avoid, then a shock that felt like the van had just been hit by an enormous hammer. This time Sousuke completely lost control, and the scenery outside- a metropolitan street- turned into a raging torrent and rotated, and before they knew it, even the sky and ground had changed places.

Now upside-down, the van's roof hit and scraped against the asphalt, making a bizarre shrieking noise. The van continued to

slide along like that until it reached the middle of the intersection, where it finally stopped.

“...uh.”

Sousuke’s head and shoulders were throbbing in pain. The offensive smell of burned metal stung his nose.

“Chidori?”

Kaname didn’t answer.

“Chidori!?”

The warped driver’s side door wouldn’t open. Sousuke gathered up the noticeable equipment and crawled out through the window. The pursuing vehicle had also flipped over, and was gushing steam about 60 meters behind them. Facing them was the truck they had hit.

“H-hey... are you okay?” the driver of a car pulled over nearby asked with a look of concern on his face as he approached. When he noticed that Sousuke, who was injured all over and covered in blood, was holding a submachine gun, the business-looking man stopped in his tracks.

“Get down,” Sousuke said, shoving the man aside and pointing his submachine gun with both hands. He shot three times, aiming at an enemy that had just crawled out of the wreckage of the pursuit vehicle. The guy fell down and didn’t move again.

“Hee...!?” the man dropped down in fright as onlookers who had watched the scene from a distance screamed and ran around trying to get away. Without giving any thought to the chaos he had created by his display of violence, Sousuke knelt down and looked into the back seat of the van. Kaname was stretched out senseless across the upside-down roof. As far as he could see, she didn’t have any conspicuous external injuries.

“Chido-” he started to call out again, but stopped because the man behind him would hear. If he did that, then what chance

would she have left of returning to a normal life- such a futile thought crossed his mind.

He crawled halfway in through the broken window and dragged Kaname's body out.

“Hang in there.”

“How many times does this make...” she said in a hazy voice. “Never again... will I ride in a vehicle you’re driving.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to as many times as it takes to protect you.”

There was the sound of squealing tires from far off. Two more vans were making their way to the scene of the accident.

“Can you stand?”

“I think so...”

“Can you run?”

“It’s not like I have a choice, is it?”

“Affirmative.”

Slinging Kaname’s bag over his shoulder, Souseki grabbed her arm and started to run. Looking as if her slender legs would get tangled up, Kaname followed unsteadily after him.

They entered an alleyway and turned west. The cars would get past them by doing this- but he was worried about the enemy surrounding them. Even if it was just by one second, they had to somehow hurry west. If they ran just a little further, there was a large nature park where a helicopter could land.

As they ran, Souseki used his radio to try and contact Lieutenant Santos.

“Uruz 7 to Gebo 9, do you copy?”

“This is Gebo 9. We can’t hear you. Report your present position. I repeat, report your present-”

“The landing zone has changed. Pick us up at the park three kilometers west of here. I repeat, pick us up at the park three kilometers west-”

There was strong static then a beep. Then silence.

It was no use.

Debris, shells, the crash- he didn’t know what the cause was, but the radio wouldn’t work after that. There was only an unintelligible code of unknown meaning filling up the screen.

“Damn.”

He threw it away. This wasn’t the time to worry about the preservation of password data.

They came out on a small road in the middle of a residential area and ran. Somewhere a dog was barking. They ran across a neighborhood housewife at the corner who screamed and dropped her trash bag.

“Wait... my ankle...” Kaname said imploringly, limping.

“We can’t.”

“It hurts.”

“Put up with it.”

Violently pulling her along by the wrist, Sousuke pointed his gun behind them. Climbing silently over the fence of the private houses, one of the Alastors came into view.

He aimed for the head and shot. The enemy crossed its arms protectively over its sensor area. In that moment, Sousuke took out a hand grenade and pulled the pin out with his teeth. As he tossed it using an underhand throw, he reversed his steps and pulled Kaname’s arm to the other side of a nearby telephone pole. The grenade rolled under the Alastor’s feet and blew up.

There was a dry explosive sound and shock wave. The flying shrapnel from the grenade hit the poles and block wall and scattered all over the place.

“Uh...”

Smoke covered the road. There wasn’t any time to see what had become of the enemy before Sousuke started running again. Even if it had worked, they couldn’t stay there.

“A....aaaaah! Waaaaaaah!”

A middle-aged school boy had fallen down in the middle of the road, clutching his right leg and wailing. It seemed that he had been walking to school when he was hit by the flying debris from the explosion. It was a shame, but there wasn’t time to help him. Sousuke pulled on Kaname’s hand, running past the boy, whose hands were covered in deep crimson.

“How could you...!!” Kaname said starkly, “We got him involved, didn’t we!? You know that, right!?”

“Would it be better to die right here!?”

“I-”

“Don’t think, just run!”

Without paying any attention Kaname, who had turned pale and was shaking, Sousuke continued to hurry.

The enemy had almost completely surrounded them. They could be attacked from any direction. And the enemy wasn’t stupid. The next time they came, it would be finished. The only way left to run was west, and the enemy was even trying to gradually close off the exit out of that tunnel.

They could hear the sound of ambulances in the distance. They left the residential area and cut across the road.

Climbing over some azalea bushes, they headed into the nature park. All of the cherry trees were bare, their naked limbs stretching out into the cold winter sky.

They could hear the sound of a helicopter rotor from overhead.

It was their allies' helicopter, Lieutenant Santos's Pave Mare. To them, it was a sweet sound, like the fluttering of an angel's wings. Somehow, they had been able to catch Sousuke and Kaname's movements.

“Good.”

The Alastor that had been hit with the grenade a short time earlier was now awkwardly running after them. And human pursuers carrying rifles were coming from the direction of 7 o'clock- behind them and to the left.

“I can't run anymore.”

“Help is coming. Just hold on.”

Lending the staggering Kaname his shoulder for support, Sousuke returned fire as they ran. The enemy shot. Bullets danced all around the two, knocking chips out of the tree trunks next to them.

He could feel the pain from his wounds and Kaname's weight.

His heart was pounding violently and it hurt to breathe.

His vision was slowly swimming.

It felt strangely like *déjà vu*. The person over his shoulder was different, but he had been in this situation many times before. In some jungle. In the hopeless ruins of a faraway place.

But his surroundings now were of course the area he had become familiar with over the past nine months, Tokyo.

No, it wasn't.

This was now his world. Specifically, a war zone.

They cut across a tree-lined road, and could see a desolate plaza through a gap in the trees.

He threw a smoke bomb into the middle of the plaza. He needed to let his allies know their position. The smoke bomb emitted an enormous amount of yellow smoke. Sousuke then

turned aside quickly, taking cover behind a tree and continued returning fire.

There was a point-blank impact from the right.

Throwing Kaname down, Sousuke fired back. The enemy fell down, clutched his stomach and cried out. Sousuke finished him off by shooting him in the head. Without wasting any time, he fired at the enemy from the other direction, then changed out the magazine of his gun with his bloodstained hands.

About 100 meters behind them, pale lightning flashed overhead. Now with its ECS cancelled, the figure of Mithril's MH-67 Pave Mare appeared and turned heavily.

The helicopter turned starboard to the enemy side. Using the rotary machine gun with which it was equipped, the helicopter fired at the pursuers. It was called a "minigun". It could shoot 6000 rounds per minute- or in other words, it could rain 100 rifle bullets a second down on the enemy.

"Good."

It certainly was reliable reinforcement.

The tremendous support fire from the sky tore the Alastors ragged. The human soldiers were also turned into sprays of blood by the barrage of bullets. Pieces of equipment, as well as human fragments created a morning rain in the park.

"..."

Kaname averted her eyes from the gruesome spectacle, shaking her head like she was shaking off a bad dream. Her face was pale and trembling so much it was heartbreaking.

Santos's voice called out over the external speakers, "Go around to the north side! We'll hold them from the back!"

The Pave Mare started to land where the smoke bomb was.

The strong wind from the rotor violently shook the plants in the park, and rolling up the smoke, spread it out in a spiral shape.

All the while, the helicopter's machine gun continued its rain of bullets.

“Stand up,” Sousuke said, pulling Kaname’s arm.

Just then, an orange light ran across the corner of his vision. He soon realized that the enemy had shot a large carrier missile.

It wasn’t aiming for them.

It flew straight towards the landing helicopter, hitting it right in the nose.

It exploded.

The impact seemed to hit his entire body.

There was a pale flash, then crimson flames.

The Pave Mare, which had still been 30 meters in the air, all at once lost its balance and crashed into the ground, tail-first.

The caudal area was smashed, and the helicopter broke apart. The rotors snapped, essentially turning into an enormous, sharp carving knives that went flying off in a haphazard directions. One stuck into the ground, one flew off into the distance, and one sliced a nearby shrub in two-

“...!”

The jet fuel caught fire, and the helicopter was engulfed in a raging inferno. Various parts that had caught on fire smoked and were scattered all over the place.

It had been too easy.

But they had to accept it.

Santos and the others had been killed instantly.

Gebo 9’s crew members- the casual conversation that they had shared with them. Their smiling faces, full of self-confidence, came to mind. The ever-so-important picture of one of the crewmembers’ families. The scene where Santos had teased Tessa at the party.

All of that passed by in an instant.

And with just one hit-

“Aah....”

It was Kaname’s desperate voice. But Sousuke didn’t even have the time to be overcome by the scene before the missile shooter was hurriedly trying to get to the other side of a thicket, launcher over his shoulder.

Sousuke lined up his shot. He fired. He killed him.

Where was the next one?

The next enemy.

Turning away from the wreckage of the burning helicopter, Sousuke continued firing his submachine gun.

“Stop it. Stop it already-”

“Stay down!”

“Stop it!!”

Forcibly holding down the half-crazed and screaming Kaname, Sousuke attacked the enemy.

He only had a few bullets left.

He didn’t have any hand grenades, either. And no one to rescue them.

There wasn’t anywhere to run.

This was game, set, match.

No-

<Due to file X1-01 special orders, emergency evacuation mode activating. Compulsory execution of external voice application>

A voice suddenly resounded out of nowhere from the burning wreckage behind them. It was a man’s deep, calm, and synthetic voice.

<This unit’s serial number is C-002. ARX-7. Code name, “Arbalest”. If there are any soldiers affiliated with this machine within a 100 meter radius, please make an oral reply>

“Al, you’re still alive?”

<Check. Sergeant Sousuke Sagara confirmed. Affirmative,
Uruz 7>

The Arm Slave that had been loaded on the Pave Mare- the Arbalest, was still alive.

<This unit is exposed to high temperatures exceeding the practical heat-resisting limits. Permission to evacuate>

“Permission granted. Get over here now.”

<Roger>

It burst out from the ugly ruins of the cargo hold.

There was a very black silhouette.

Pushing its way through red hot metal and flames, an eight-meter tall giant appeared.

◆ ◆ ◆

It wasn’t a perfect attack.

But their aim was terribly accurate.

The flight of the enemy missiles continued to a third wave, all in all raining down 18 shots of 500-pound explosives. The anti-aircraft radar system. The communications system. The intercept missile system. The runways, observatories and several munitions storehouses. All of those were destroyed, with quite a bit of damage reaching underground, as well. The fire extinguishing system had started, but when it would stop- more than that, whether there was a real point to it at all- that in and of itself wasn’t clear.

Staring morosely at the mostly irrelevant data on the screen, Tessa said, “Casualties?”

“18 with light injuries, 11 with serious injuries-” the watch company officer paused for a moment, then said, “-and five dead. The people in observatory number two didn’t make it out in time.”

“I see,” she said in a voice like she had just heard tomorrow’s weather, and nodded. She remembered the faces and names of the dead. She even remembered their favorite genres of music.

“Captain-”

“The real trouble starts here,” she said, lightly holding Mardukas, who was trying to comfort her, back with one hand. To even her own surprise, she found that her fingertips were shaking ever-so-slightly.

“The enemy attack will keep coming. More than likely, they’ll send in ground troops, too. This time they’ll use aircrafts. Flight control. What’s the status of the runways?”

“They’ve been hit bad,” said the officer in charge of flight control as he displayed the damage to the base on the screen. “The elevators and dome, too. It’ll probably be more than six hours until the aircrafts on this base can take-off.”

“That’s not enough time.”

They had already lost most of their anti-aircraft faculties.

In order to intercept any enemy aircrafts approaching Merida Island, they would need a sortie of Super Harriers equipped with the very latest advanced-model mid-range missiles.

However, the huge elevator that transported such aircrafts from the underground hangar to the surface had been destroyed. Just removing the wreckage alone would take at least a day. And that estimate by the flight-controller included AS assistance.

“We’re receiving a transmission from Gebo 5. 10 large-scale aircrafts approaching from zone F8. Either transports or bombers.”

Now that the base's radar was destroyed, they depended solely on the radar of the helicopter they had sent out earlier.

“Seems they’re serious about this...”

“Yes, it does,” Mardukas agreed.

The enemy really planned on invading the island.

Should they retaliate? Or turn tail and run? ...no, neither of those were choices she had. Tessa knew that very well.

The *de Danaan* was having some adjustments made. The work had been rushed since yesterday, but it would not be operational for several more hours. In other words, for the next several hours, Tessa and the others were prevented from escaping the island by those means. By air, and by sea.

It was a magnificent surprise attack- Mithril had lost. By taking advantage of the chaos in the communications and radar networks, they had blindsided them and left them without a leg to stand on. Afterwards they would be able to strike as they pleased.

However, they weren’t such pushovers as to let the enemy do what they wanted. If the enemy wanted to bring it on, then Mithril would keep pace with them. At best, give them some painful memories-

“Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, please start all of the ASes. Equip them with class-A equipment, even the training M6es. Station six ASes along the north bank.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Captain, we are receiving a warning from Gebo 3 on patrol...!” one of the officers said in a tense voice, “Zone G2. There are approaching... warships? It’s not clear what, but something is approaching from the sea. Three of them detected by infrared.”

“I need to you clarify. What’s coming?”

“I’m sorry. Since there isn’t a corresponding category... it seems that Gebo 3 can’t explain, either. No, wait. We’re getting an image. Putting it on screen.”

“Hurry.”

He minimized the map of the command center, and switched to the images captured by Gebo 3’s optical sensors.

The image was very far away and shown in real-time.

Zone G2 was a 30-mile area of ocean northwest of Merida Island. It was very shallow with coral reefs that had sunk years ago underwater. Plunging through those ocean green waters were the three “somethings”, heading southeast.

In a moment, they could see what looked like three fat men submerged up to their hips in ocean water, solemnly pushing through the waves. They were holding what looked like a laundry pole with both hands.

But that wasn’t what it was.

They were large. Abnormally large. And those “three men” were covered in boorish blue armor. They looked like inverted triangles wearing out-of-date metal armor. Their enormous shoulders were comparable to gas storage tanks.

“Behemoths...!?”

Those massive ASes- were Behemoths. Just like the one that had wreaked havoc on Ariake six months earlier. Now three of them together had appeared, and were heading towards Merida Island.

What looked like laundry poles were actually enormous rifles- cannons. Very large caliber cannons that looked like they could destroy any kind of fortification with just one shot.

Even though they looked like they were moving slowly, the scale was different. They were probably going faster than 30 knots. In other words, they would reach the base in an hour.

Three Behemoths.

Super weapons equipped with Lambda Drivers that could withstand all sorts of enemy fire. The only thing that could compete with them was the Arbalest.

And those enemies were coming closer to the base-



Now in the Arbalest, Sousuke grabbed up Kaname and exited the nature park.

With the power of the 3rd generation AS, it only took two or three jumps to clear it. They had no choice but the leave the wreckage of the fallen Pave Mare.

He called up the digital map.

The north and south roads of the commuter belt were horribly congested right now. Using that congestion as a shield, Sousuke hurried north. He would use the ECS for a while. If the invisibility mode were functioning, it would make it difficult for enemy pursuit. Even an ordinary person who was scared whenever they saw its figure would only make a strange face at the nearby propulsion sound and ionized smell.

Even still, the city was in major chaos.

Patrol car sirens wailed, and police helicopters circled in the sky.

They went by Mitaka, towards Kichijouji. Since the roads were covered up, they moved from rooftop to rooftop. Jumping over the JR tracks, the Arbalest landed on the rooftop of a tenant building. All while transparent.

Sousuke set Kaname down on the roof, and then opened the hatch.

“Wait on standby in mode 4. Even if I’m mistaken about this, don’t use the active sensors.”

<Training message. Please explain the meaning of “even if I’m mistaken about this”>

“...”

Accurately judging that Sousuke was about to shout at it, the Arbalest’s AI, Al, said:

<A joke. Did it relieve the tension?>

“Since I completely owe you for today, I’ll let it pass.”

<Thank you, Sergeant>

Sousuke slipped out, coming down the arm and rushed over to Kaname. The atmosphere was frazzled, because the Arbalest was still using the ECS. Something within the limits of the invisibility field became invisible from the outside. Even Kaname, who was sitting exhausted in the Arbalest’s hands.

Looking haggard, she asked, “Can we... take a break, now?”

“Yes. For the time being.”

“I see...”

“Have you calmed down now?”

“On the outside, yeah.”

Her voice was dark. She sighed.

She rubbed her sore ankle, then placed her hand on the Arbalest’s finger.

“This always shows up when we’re in a tight spot, doesn’t it?”

<Are those words evaluating this unit’s specifications, Miss Chidori?>

Kaname smiled awkwardly at Al’s words.

“I guess. Anyway...”

She faltered.

“That was Santos’ helicopter, wasn’t it?”

Kaname also knew about Santos. She had seen her many times since last fall.

“Yes.”

“So... they’re gone, aren’t they?”

“Yes, unfortunately...”

Kaname clinched her fists.

“They died coming to save me...”

“No. It was their mission.”

“But it’s the same thing, right?”

“...”

“Everyone’s getting mixed up in this...” She held both of her arms and drooped her head. “Even though I haven’t done anything... I’m sorry... but, I... I don’t think I can be strong anymore...”

Her voice was trembling.

“Chidori...”

“I’m scared. Of myself. Of them. And... I’m sorry, but...”

Big teardrops fell from her cheeks, which were hidden by her long hair.

“I’m scared of you, too.”

“...”

“I don’t know what to do anymore. I like you, but I’m scared. I like you so much it hurts, but I’m scared. I get panicked, and I feel so helpless...”

This was the first time he had ever heard her so vulnerable before.

But it was only natural.

No matter what, she always appeared too strong. No matter what, she was always the older sister. No matter what, she always charged, “*Give me your best shot*”.

But in the end, she was just a 17-year-old girl.

A human being that could stay completely calm in the face of raging violence- that would be stranger.

Just then, there was an electronic sound coming from the pocket of her jacket. It was her cell phone. She had received an email.

“...?”

Looking down, she took out the phone. She didn’t think at all about the danger that someone could find their location by her taking the message.

When she read the email, Kaname wailed out like someone completely broken.

“No... noooo....!”

“What is it?”

“Kyouko is... everyone is...!”

He took the phone from Kaname. There was a picture attached to the message.

It was a rooftop. The rooftop of Jindai High school.

There was a female student who had been gagged- their classmate, Kyouko Tokiwa, with her hands tied behind her back. She had a ton of block-shaped C4 explosives wrapped around her torso. Kyouko looked very pale, and like she didn’t have the faintest clue about what was happening to her.

The message read like this:

“There are explosives like this in various places inside the school. If you want to save your friends, leave the AS and come to the school. If you don’t comply, we’ll blow everything up.”

Chapter 3: Damage Control

Sergeant Kurz Weber was helping with putting out fires on “Path 0”, which ran through the middle of the Merida Island Base.

Since he had been out jogging when the air raid had started, he was still wearing a sweat suit. He was wearing one of the oxygen masks that had been equipped around the base, and using an adze to remove obstacles, he was busy pulling casualties out from underneath the steel framework. He was drenched from head to toe by the ocean water unloaded by groups fighting the fires.

Angry rebukes and reprimands were being tossed back and forth. The lights were out, and the dim passageways were draped in clouds of water vapor. Water poured down in torrents from the ceiling, and he could barely see five meters in front of him.

Kurz carried a casualty over to a waiting medic.

“Second degree burns on his right arm! He didn’t breathe in any smoke, and he’s conscious! He said his right ankle hurts!”

“Thank you, Sergeant!”

The wounded man was carried away on a stretcher.

Kurz took the mask, inhaled the stuffy air and coughed a few times.

“...damn, this is a hell of a way to wake someone up.”

He tried one of the cell phones for internal use on the base. Thankfully, the lines were still working. When he tried to call the leader of the SRT, Clouseau was in the middle of a call; so he called the second-in-command, Second Lieutenant Melissa Mao, and got through.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Three enemy Behemoths are coming. Hangar number three. ASAP.”

“Roger.”

With just that concise exchange, they hung up. He was to meet up with her as soon as possible in hanger number three, where the main force of their unit, the M9 Gernsbacks, were kept.

They were both professionals. There was no need to show concern for the other’s welfare or be happy that the other was okay. A detailed explanation of the situation could come later, too.

However-

“Did she say three Behemoths?”

Those huge ASes? Three of them?

How on earth were they going to fight those?

Hadn’t missiles and 7mm bullets been useless against that giant?

The memory of the battle a half-a-year earlier in Ariake, Tokyo, came to Kurz’s mind. An entire unit of self-defense ASes had been helpless before the Behemoth. The only one who had been able to oppose it had been Sousuke’s Arbalest- because it was equipped with a lambda driver.

Even given that, it had been a severely close fight.

And now, neither the Arbalest nor Sousuke were here.

He ran to hanger number three, where everyone was already running around, making pre-battle preparations.

“Isn’t the transfer armor for three done yet!?”

“Not yet!”

“Get it done now and perform a complete check! You can go ahead and skip up to protocol C!”

“Roger!”

“You idiot! There! Carry the 40mm bullets over there!”

“Huh? But-”

“Ahh, damn it, didn’t you listen!? All GEC is loading in the second spot!!”

The company commander of maintenance, Lieutenant Sachs, was yelling here and there at his subordinates. Even though the hangar had escaped damage from the air raid, the lights were on emergency settings. Through the dim red lighting, the M9 Gernsbacks, which were still connected to power cables, let out a low, propulsion sound.

“Sorry I’m late!”

The AS pilots were gathered in one corner of the hangar. Including the pilots of the old M6es, there was a total of 18 of them. They were in front of a whiteboard covered in dregs of ink.

Just like Kurz, everyone was dressed in what they just happened to be wearing at the time.

Melissa Mao, who had slipped into the clothes of a commissioned officer- the khaki-colored skirt and blouse like Tessa wore- had a difficult look on her face. It was not her usual field clothing.

More than likely, she had been doing paperwork earlier. Since her promotion to Second Lieutenant, she had been wearing the uniform of a female commissioned officer more often.

“You here!? Attention!” Mao shouted in a not so very elegant fashion. Then Clouseau, who was dressed in his field clothes and looking a little worn-out, probably because he had been up all night, moved out in front of the dirty white board.

“It would be useless to refute with a ‘maybe’, wouldn’t it?” the Lieutenant, a Canadian of African-descent, replied. “Amalgam has mounted a general attack. They have more power than we expected. There are three Behemoths approaching from area G2. In 40 minutes, this base will be in firing range of their rifles.”

Clouseau barely refrained from clicking his tongue.

Just 40 minutes. That didn't leave them with much time, did it? How had they missed them from so close a distance?

"It's well known that these Behemoths are thought to be designed as anti-AS gunboats. The main target of these three machines is the last of our major fighting potential- namely, the ASes.

It's a difficult situation even for CAS (Close Air Support), but we'll carry out an ambush attack."

"Hey, hey, wait a minute," Kurz said as he saluted. "These 'Giants' are equipped with those lambda drivers, aren't they? Fighting a machine like that, let alone three of them- it's impossible."

"That may be so, but we still have to fight them," Clouseau said quietly. "This base was designed to withstand substantial bombing, but there are limits even to that. If the three Behemoths come ashore, they'll destroy *de Danaan*, which is still undergoing maintenance at the dock."

"But-"

"It's the only way to escape."

"..."

"This is a solitary island in distant seas. Since there are no reinforcements, the enemy won't consider taking prisoners. If we lose the *de Danaan*, every human being on this squad will have no choice but to commit suicide in this shelter. There isn't any way of surviving other than bringing down those Behemoths."

A heavy silence filled the room.

Every AS pilot in the room had already heard the report about the famous battle with the Behemoth. They also read the detailed reports from Sousuke, Kurz and Tessa.

There was no way to win in the first place. Everyone knew that too well. So did Clouseau and Mao.

“So, what do we make of this?” said Corporal Spake of the SRT, breaking the silence. He was an American in his mid-twenties, who had come from the Marines’ Special Forces. “Stop this nonsense about fighting an absurd losing battle. Let’s get some rifles and go to the command center.”

With just those words, they understood what Spake was trying to say- Mao said in a low voice, “Stop it, Spake,” but he continued on defiantly. “In the event that Tessa and the *de Danaan* do make it out unharmed, the enemy would be aboard, too. They know the A-B-C’s of strategy, too. Resistance against a battle we’ve already lost without anywhere to run to- that’s incredible. We would have to be ready for heavy damage. If we finish this with a business-like discussion, I think they would be satisfied, as well.”

“Keep talking bullshit. You’ll be tried for treason and deserting under fire,” Clouseau said.

“You’re saying this to a soldier-for-hire? The Operations Headquarters was blown to kingdom come, wasn’t it? Are you going to pay our fees? Well, Lieutenant?”

“You bastard...”

“So we should gladly die for our colleagues in the unit, right? But this isn’t some dumb Hollywood war movie, is it? That kind of simple-minded heroism won’t cut it. I’m telling you, I won’t die for nothing.”

His voice was already dripping with venom.

If there had been even the slightest possibility of escaping, Spake probably wouldn’t have said such a thing. That’s how he had been up to this point.

But this time was different.

The odds were just too bad. Spake was definitely not a bad man; when he had been drunk at a pub before, he had said that he

wanted the power to do everything possible, because he liked Tessa. However, he didn't think that it would be fine to die without any reservations. And it seemed like others besides Spake were thinking the same thing.

The tension ran through the strained atmosphere.

Just then, a new voice broke in.

“Use me, then. It's a good idea.”

It was Tessa. She was followed by two PRT soldiers carrying automatic rifles as they all walked in through the entrance of the hangar.

“Captain...”

“I thought that such a discussion was going on, so I came to see.”

“You heard?” Spake mumbled glumly.

“Yes, but only part of it.”

“Please don't take it badly. This is just business, too.”

“I see,” Tessa said, nodding. She then turned to the soldier beside her and said, “Please lend me your gun.”

After a moment's hesitation, the soldier took the Swiss-made handgun from the holster on his waist, and handed it to Tessa.

“Thank you.”

She released the safety and pulled the hammer up. Slowly, she got a reliable handle on it.

She stood very still, calm, holding the jet-black pistol. Although it was pointed towards the floor, that was enough to make everyone present feel unsettled.

“I know there are others who feel the same way as Mr. Spake does. However, I will not accept it. I will kill anyone who attempts to mutiny right here.”

She said this with a mechanical smile on her face. Spake stood there gaping for a short while, then finally gave a small sigh and shrugged.

“Hey, hey, don’t do anything rash. I think you’re a good kid, but-”

The sound of the gunshot resonated throughout the hangar.

Just like that, Tessa had shot at Spake’s foot. The bullet had scraped off the concrete and hit the back wall, kicking up a small cloud of dust.

“Correct your attitude, *Corporal*,” Tessa said to the naturally stupefied Spake, who was staring straight at her. “Perhaps you think that I came on purpose, to cry to try to get your cooperation, right? Or maybe you thought that I would hope for your good intentions, or ask for your loyalty out of sympathy, right?”

“Uh...”

“As long as you are here, you’re walking down the ‘Soldier’s Corridor’ as well, right? It was your own volition that has brought you into this predicament. Am I wrong?”

“No...”

“Did you think I was just a nominal princess?”

“...”

“Just say it. Who am I? What’s my post and rank?”

It was the same, sweet tone of voice she always used; definitely not something that would threaten others. However, her quiet words were tinged with a dark intensity.

Spake was quiet for a while, swallowed, then opened his mouth to speak.

“...Captain... Teletha Testarossa. Commander-in-chief of the *Tuatha de Danaan* squadron.”



「言つてみなさい。わたしがだれか。その役職と階級を」
いつも通りの柔らかい口調。
だが、彼女の言葉は異様な迫力を帯びていた。

"Just say it. Who am I? What's my post and rank?" It was the same, sweet tone of voice she always used. But her words were tinged with a dark intensity.

“Good. Now withdraw your last remarks and apologize. Immediately.”

“...I take it back. It was a joke that went too far. I’m sorry.”

“Very well.”

Tessa pushed the hammer back down on the gun and forced it back on the guarding soldier.

“It’s unfortunate, but the enemy has the firm intention of wiping Mithril off the face of the earth. Even if we proposed to enter into reasonable negotiations, it probably wouldn’t do any good.”

“...”

“Corporal Spake. This group needs your abilities. If everyone survives, I’ll forget about the crime of abetting mutiny.”

The squadron chief reversed her steps and started to leave, the sound of her pumps hitting against the floor echoing loudly.

Spake, with his head down, said in a strained voice, “...survive? Where do you get such hope...?”

“If there isn’t any, we’ll make it. That is all.”

Tessa stood still.

“Read my report again. Use your head and devise a scheme. If you have any problems, ask for advice from Lemming or myself. Or are you a good-for-nothing who can’t even do that?”

“uh...”

“It seems you misunderstand me. I have never once ordered any of you to ‘die’. Never once. And- I *never will*.”

For just that moment, her voice was full of unwavering strength.

Determination.

Determination that would yield to no one.

She alone was not giving up. No matter what, she was going to try and save the squadron.

Just a seventeen-year-old girl.

Oh, lord.

At a time when even the veteran soldiers had lost faith, the small back of the girl who could advise them seemed ten times bigger.

Everyone was standing up very straight. Clouseau, Mao, and Spake, too. As well as all of the other officers. Even Kurz, with his spontaneous feelings, was able to assume the same posture.

Tessa looked around one last time.

“Stay alive. That’s an order.”

Everyone answered simultaneously, “Yes, Ma’am!”

“Good luck.”

This time, she gave them a heartfelt smile and left the hangar.

Even the commotion of the maintenance work had stopped. The remaining soldiers looked at Spake.

“Ah, I know-”

He seemed sullen- however, he also seemed very clear.

“I’m sorry, damn it. I was just irritated. But you were all thinking about it just a little, right? So don’t look at me like that.”

What Spake said was probably true. Most everyone smiled a little guiltily, then looked at Clouseau. He also relaxed and smiled.

“...you really did it that time, didn’t you? She’s right. Let’s quit wallowing around in pathetic resignation, and think about it.

And why don’t we say that your pay will be your life?”

“Sounds fair.”

“Well, there might be something we can do...”

“Ahh, I can’t stand it. I wanted a bride.”

At Spake’s last words, Clouseau shrugged.

“That’s too bad. A proposal to her goes up the ranks.”

This time they laughed out loud together.

Which was what they needed most in a war situation like this. Something that was lost in times of human suffering- the humor had returned. Laughter made it easier to think. One's outlook expanded, and the imagination was stimulated.

That was it. A breach had been produced.

“Now, then... let's get on with discussing the counter-plan. Now, who here is the one who currently has experience fighting and sticking it to a Behemoth?” Clouseau continued, and everyone found the face of Kurz.

“Huh...? You mean me?” Kurz said in surprise, pointing towards his own nose.



They avoided any detection of their position as they moved from Kichijouji to the Okikubo vicinity.

After reaching the roof of some apartments in front of an open shop, Sousuke once again put the AS on standby and got out.

Even though she had been riding in the hand of the Arbalest as it jumped invisibly from building to building using ECS mode, Kaname had been unresponsive the entire time. She was still unresponsive.

“Chidori.”

She didn't answer.

She was leaning back against the fingers of the AS, staring into empty space with tired eyes.

Even her long hair was disheveled.

“I know that you're in shock, but-”

“I understand. Really,” she uttered. “There's no way I can continue the life I've had up 'til now. One day the enemy will

come for me, and after they cause a lot of trouble, they'll take me away.”

“Chidori...”

“That was the conclusion that became clear more than six months ago. I can’t stay here. I guess this is just my punishment for not facing it...”

She drooped her head, her shoulders shaking.

“It’s just like he... Tessa’s brother, said. I should have shut-up and gone with him. There’s a lot of people involved now because I was stubborn. All because of me. It’s my fault.”

“That’s not true. It was the enemy that made it come to this-”

“If I had gone with him yesterday, this wouldn’t have happened, right? But I was thinking, ‘It’ll work out like it always does. I’ll be able to come back one day.’ And now Kyouko... and everyone else is...”

“They’re still okay. Don’t get upset.”

“But there’s no way to save them, is there!?”

“That’s not for certain.”

Kaname threw Sousuke an angry look. Her eyes were bloodshot. It was the first time she had ever given him a look of resentment.

“What are you talking about? You’re being stupid, you know that? Everyone at school is a hostage. It’s not just Kyouko-detonators have been hidden all over the place. You surely realize how difficult it is even for a professional to find hidden explosives?”

“Using the Arbalest’s electronic armor, it’s possible to localize the source of electromagnetic waves-”

“No good. With the level of the equipment that the enemy has, the detectors would probably use a difficult correspondence

system and send out a signal. And of course they probably have the school surrounded, making it difficult for even an AS to come close. Don't you understand why that helicopter crashed? It was also using ECS. The enemy has guidance missiles equipped with an ultra-broadband radar that they've made small enough for infantrymen to carry. Isn't that strange considering they have broad molecular spectral sensors, interference-tracing mikes, and high-sensitivity magnetic sensors? For example, even if that AS can locate the positions of the bombs, do you think it could disable them? Even if you knew what was inside, it would be useless. They could make as many devices that react to nuclear magnetic resonance as they want to. Don't you understand something so simple?"

For a short while, Sousuke was speechless.

He couldn't understand but just half of what the girl in front of him had spoken of so naturally.

"You don't understand?"

"No..."

"I see. Of course, that's because *you're that way, too.*"

Kaname spat out the words, demonstratively snorting her nose in irritation.

"Chidori..." Sousuke said soothingly as a cold chill ran down his spine.

"What's with that look? Do you think I've gone crazy?"

"I didn't say that. But you're-"

"Yeah, that's it. It's just like he said. It's annoying. When you make that kind of dumb face, I feel like you're mocking me. Why doesn't anyone understand such simple things? Are you all stupid?"

“Chidori. That’s just a feeling you have because your intelligence separates you from ordinary people. Don’t look down on others. Accept your weaknesses. Remember, you’re always-”

“That’s it. By giving me that worried look, you’re asserting a psychological dominance over me. Do you think you can take leadership with such a pretense? How simple.”

“Chidori...!”

Sousuke grabbed Kaname’s slender wrist, jerking it up. Without being able to draw from her disciplined strength, she leaned weakly against him.

“You said it earlier. That you were afraid of me. You liked me, but you were afraid,” he said, staring at her from a distance so close he could almost feel her breath. “So do I. I like you. But I’m scared. I don’t understand it, but I’m attracted to you. That’s how it’s been, ever since I first met you. I’d never felt that way before. The one who changed my entire world was you.”

“...”

“I was thinking about it until this morning. School and Mithril- whether or not I should throw it all away and run away with you. Just the two of us. But something held me back, and I couldn’t say it. Part of it was that I didn’t have the courage. But that wasn’t the only reason. It wouldn’t mean anything, just the two of us. Tokiwa and everyone at school, my colleagues in Mithril- I need you to be among friends; to laugh and get mad at them. That’s why I-”

Even though he was surprised at his own verbosity, Sousuke continued. “That’s why I- will protect it all. Not just you. I will guard everything in the world that you belong to. If I don’t, my ‘mission’ is finished. So don’t despair. Together we’ll save Tokiwa. And everyone at school; and of course, you. So please come back to your senses. I’m certain that from your point of view,

I'm just a stupid guy, but... I have the power to fight. How many times have we done this before? I want suggestions. Don't give up, and lend me your strength."



Kaname stared expressionlessly at Sousuke. He couldn't read her eyes at all to know what feelings and sentiments were coming to her mind.

“You really think we can save them?”

“Affirmative. If you’re with me.”

There was a long silence.

Finally, she said, “If this was a cheap novel, this would probably be the emotional kiss scene...”

Her exhausted voice came out sounding like that of an old woman, and she escaped from his arm.

“But of course that’s impossible. We’re the best at giving up quietly...”



The base was being bombed again to finish the job.

M6s equipped with anti-aircraft missiles were deployed throughout the jungle maneuvering grounds, and by ambushing the enemy as much as possible, they were able to shoot down half of the enemy bombers- but the remaining planes rained an incessant downpour of concrete-penetrating bombs and fuel vaporizing bombs on the base.

“Uruz 2 to Headquarters. Damage report,” Mao called out as she stared at the black smoke rising from the direction of the base. She had already sortied from the base in her M9, and was hiding in the dense forest on the outskirts of the maneuvering grounds- on the north end of Merida Island.

“This is Headquarters. They’re hitting us with everything they’ve got. The upper stories have lost almost all function. However, the *de Danaan*’s dock is safe. The evacuation had finished, though, so there are few human casualties. Please use

passage number three when you withdraw, as it is undamaged and the main large elevator has been destroyed.”

Passage number three, which was under construction, was the tunnel that connected the aboveground training grounds with the belowground base. It seemed that the enemy didn’t know about its existence yet.

“Gebo 3 to all units. The Behemoths have started to deploy. Behemoth A is moving towards area E1. Behemoth B is moving towards area H1. Behemoth C has stopped in area G1. It seems they intend to encircle Merida Island. Transferring data now.”

The helicopter that was continuing its enemy search from above the island compressed the latest information on enemy movements, which was sent to all allies by short-range communications.

“This is Uruz 1. Thank you, Gebo 3. That’s enough, pull out of there.”

“Gebo 3, roger. Behemoth C fired just now. We will move to area X0 and wait.”

There was a loud noise. The sound of an explosion came from the southern skies.

“This is Gebo 3. Our engine’s been hit. We’re going to try an emergency landing. I repeat, we’re going to try an emergency landing. The enemy fired an antiaircraft missile.”

The transmission from the helicopter stopped.

No one knew if they were all right or not. However, with their skills, they would probably make it- that’s all anyone could hope for, anyway.

“Uruz 1 to Kano 13. Go to the crash site.”

“Kano 13, roger.”

“All other units, remain on standby. The data has been collected, right? Behemoth B is the target. Disregard A and C.”

Uruz 1 and 2 will take on each of those. Uruz 2, you're going after A. I'm going to have some fun with C."

"Uruz 2, roger. It's pretty tasteless to have to dance with them, though."

Clouseau snorted on the other end of the radio.

"I feel the same way. Uruz 2, I authorize you to use ITCC-5 unlimited operation."

"Uruz 2, roger. At the very least, I'll take good care of it."

Now, then.

From inside her machine, which was in full ECS mode, Mao took a deep breath. Already, her opponent- Behemoth A, was being acquired. Roughly four miles from the northern coast of the island. It would be soon now. As the Behemoth was submerged in the ocean water up to its knees, she took aim at its enormous gun turret.

From here on out, Mao had to fight this Behemoth alone. Of course, she had no intentions of destroying it. She simply was to use every tactic she knew to gain time- that was all.

Clouseau was also fighting Behemoth C for the same reason. Mao and Clouseau's M9s were different from the others because they were equipped with the "ITCC-5 Integrated Tactical Correspondence Control System"- a powerful data link apparatus used on the front line commanders' machines. It could integrate and control all sorts of battlefield data, and instantly carry out countless controls and commands on any ally machines. Not just ASes, either. If a weapon were loaded with a system controlled by the ITTC-5, it could be manipulated to do just about anything.

Tanks, for example. Or antiaircraft self-propelled artillery. Or even- an AS.

"Okay, then, here we go... Friday!"

<Yes, Lieutenant?>

“Change the control system to XA-1. We’re going to attack Behemoth A.”

<Roger. Connecting control system to XA-1. Assigning optimum target for Behemoth A>

She pressed the button for final confirmation on the screen. The active display appeared, and entered preparations for remote operation of XA-1. There was an unmanned AS on standby in the bushes 800 meters from Mao’s M9- an M6 Bushnell.

The M6 aimed at the Behemoth in the ocean, fired anti-tank missiles from its shoulder rocket launchers, and then quickly began to move out. Using its two smokeless rocket motors, the M6 went flying towards the enemy.

Perceiving the source of the fired missiles, the Behemoth quickly turned its cannon towards the unmanned M6 and fired without any hesitation.

There was an enormous flash.

The head-mounted guns also fired, spitting out 30mm bullets by the thousands at the M6.

The slower M6 was unable to make the necessary evasive moves, and the point-blank impact combined with the incessant 30mm bullets caused it to come to pieces when the cannon hit it a second time.

“Sh...”

The screen showed her a scene as if she had been destroyed, but Mao’s machine was perfectly fine. The signal ceased, and the control system returned back to her AS.

The missiles that the M6 had shot were getting closer to the enemy.

“Detonate XM-3.”

<Roger>

Immediately following, an enormous waterspout erupted next to the Behemoth's right leg.

A self-propelling mine hidden in the area outside the base had exploded.

The blast shook the giant unexpectedly. Just a little.

Immediately after that, the antitank missiles made a direct hit.

One hit the right shoulder. Then another hit the left arm.

“Now, what happens now...?”

Staying hidden, Mao zoomed in on the images taken by the optical sensors of another unmanned M6- the XA-2. If she used the ITCC-5, the ability of that machine would make it like manipulating her own.

She very carefully observed the right shoulder of the Behemoth after the first shots.

“Damn...”

It was completely undamaged.

That was because its lambda driver was working. An ultimate system that defended against all sorts of attacks, and occasionally became a weapon.

There was no way to hurt this enemy.

A feeling of helplessness welled up within her chest. She started to tell the other units the details, when she barely noticed something.

A small cloud of white smoke was rising from the Behemoth's right leg. The right leg that had first been bitten by that mine. Its armor was subtly warped, and the coating was peeling off.

“It... worked?”

Six months earlier, in Ariake. With one tiny rifle, Kurz was able to cause devastating damage.

So that was it.

If they could hit them suddenly. If they could attack them at an unexpected moment...

There was room left for them to take advantage of the Behemoths.

It was too early to despair yet...!

“Uruz 2 to all units! Although it’s not much, I damaged the huge AS!” she said, suppressing her excitement. “We can do it. Just be careful. The enemy’s firepower is overwhelming.”

A reply of “Roger” came from every unit. Their voices were encouraged. She knew from experience that every ally had been hoping for this report.

Just then, she received a message from Kalinin in the command center.

“This is Perth 1. This is right after good news, I know, but I have to report some bad news. An enemy landing force is approaching from the southeast. It probably has a large number of ASes as well as infantrymen. The enemy intends to overwhelm the underground of this base.”

So they were here at last, huh? The fucking bastards.

Mao cursed inwardly as she operated the electronic armor.

“More than likely, we will be engaging in hand-to-hand combat in less than fifteen minutes. Until then, we must do what we can to finish off the Behemoths. If we don’t.”

Kalinin’s words were cut off.

“All units. The *de Danaan* is unable to put to sea. If it were to leave the underground dock, it would be sniped.”

It was a sound argument, but Mao felt strongly irritated.

Just ten minutes?

Against those three?

That was absurd.

“But, no matter what, we have to do it, don’t we?”

“Affirmative.”

“Hah. Really, that’s easy for you to...”

Behemoth A’s head was facing her way. ECCS. Mao’s machine had been detected.

The cannon was pointing at her. The AS switched to master mode. She canceled ECS, and emerged using combat maneuvers.

She jumped. The enemy AS fired. There were tremendous explosions reminiscent of a battleship armament. The thunderous roar and shock rocked Mao’s M9 violently.

“Looks like it’s going to be a tough fifteen minutes...”

The machine turned. Mao cursed as she kept an eye on her landing spot on the screen.



The three giant ASes kept up their relentless long distance bombardment.

The Behemoths weren’t just armed with large caliber howitzers- or “clothes poles”- they were also scattering numerous napalm bombs across Merida Island from launchers equipped on their shoulders. Many M6’s were helplessly destroyed by the saturated missile attack.

The strange shaped rocks often used as a landmark in the maneuvering grounds- “The Twin Rocks”, were smashed to pieces by the bombs; even that couldn’t be saved. The above ground facilities were destroyed to the point where they didn’t even cast a shadow, the rainforest was ablaze in flames, and an enormous amount of black smoke shrouded the skies above the island.

If anybody had been able to see Merida Island from far away on the ocean, they might have thought that there was a sinking battleship engulfed in flames. After they had spread the

storm of destruction enough, the Behemoths slowly began their descent on the island from three sides.

“Just doing whatever the hell you want, huh? Damn it.”

In the midst of the violent shelling, Kurz’s M9 hid patiently in the underground shelter on the southern part of the island. The intermittent tremors could be felt in the cockpit. All that could be seen on his screen was the gloom of the shelter, and clouds of dust dancing in the thin light.

<Behemoth B has entered area H0. Estimated sixty seconds until C-line.>

The enemy machine closest to the base was entering into his range. Clouseau and Mao were trying to give each of the remaining Behemoths trouble. They were buying as much time as they could by using a strong data link function to activate all of the surplus unmanned ASes in coordination with self-propulsion mines.

During that time, all of the remaining M9’s on the *Tuatha de Danaan* were waiting to intercept just Behemoth B.

“Now then...” Kurz mumbled to himself.

Two M9s piloted by Corporal Spake and another SRT member were hidden in the sea south of Merida Island. Since each M9 had landing faculties, they were able to move, without any difficulty, at depths of up to thirty meters.

From what they could see on the images taken by Gebo 3 from a distance, they judged that these Behemoths did not have much anti-underwater combat equipment. This opinion was shared by both Lieutenant Sachs of the maintenance squad, and Second Lieutenant Vilan of the research department-



-in a pre-operation meeting, Sachs, a large man with a mustache, said this with a grim face:

“There’s plenty of ground equipment, but it’s better if we don’t try the depth charges.

“However, there is the sphere array passive sonar in the chest. Also, the size of it. There may also be the towed array sonar, too...”

They were the same type of sensors found on an attack-class submarine.

“...but if they enter the littoral waters around the island, sonar won’t work, because only the upper body will be above the surface of the water. So... if I was the designer, I would attach short-range, high frequency sonar around the shin, or knee area. And if the landing operation was the main mission, I probably wouldn’t be able to mimic moving that slowly across the bottom of the ocean. With compact, high frequency sonar, they should be able to understand the topography of the bottom of the ocean as well as the location of any mines.”

“What do you think the class and performance of high frequency sonar are?”

Clouseau asked, and Sachs shrugged.

“I don’t know. But the equipment on those monsters ain’t impressive enough to scare us.

“For example, those howitzers; they’re not a type of rail gun. They’re probably automated weapons misappropriated from the main armaments of battleships like the Missouri. I don’t think that the development of those cannon was especially original. With that kind of time, it seems quite fast to stock up on quite a lot of super high speed interlocking energy missiles. Even just test firing- it would require an incredibly spacious target area. Even if they

were able to secure such a location behind the iron curtain, it would've been difficult to keep that a secret from Mithril, right?"

"In other words, the sonar is the same type?"

"I can't be positive, but the size of those shins is about the same as the sail of an 8,000 ton submarine. If you think about the enormity of developing new sonar, I would probably forcibly mount it on existing equipment. There's nothing that can reliably surpass it."

"...temporarily, you mean. As for the enemy currently using the latest high frequency sonar, do you think that self-propelling mines or M9's could be hidden from that detection?"

"I don't know. The Captain would have the most details about that, wouldn't she?"

At that time, Mao was already talking about something on her cell phone with Tessa, who was in the command center. More than likely Tessa, who was under tremendous pressure, gave her a short reply. Mao's conversation seemed very brief.

"I just heard. 'We can. Since Sergeant Dejilany's going, ask him,' she said."

"Okay. Do you think that there's a way to inflict serious damage to those monsters with the assumption that we can ambush from the sea?"

Everyone looked sullen at Clouseau's words. If the enemy were an ordinary "giant", they would be able to see a weakness from here, but the Behemoth was different. Because of the Lambda Driver, most of the attacks were deflected.

"It's been said before, but the Lambda Driver isn't all-powerful."

This time it was Lieutenant Vilan who spoke. He was in his mid-twenties, with intelligent brown eyes, and blonde hair. He had

been transferred from the research department, and was the one person who knew about the Lambda Driver in detail.

“First, there are limits to the duration of time for the passenger, and the ability to concentrate. Also, at that level, the strength of the “shield” is controlled by the ability to concentrate. If we can just make a surprise attack, there’s the possibility of inflicting damage on the enemy. Sergeant Weber is proof of that.”

When Kurz was fighting the Behemoth in Ariake, he had successfully damaged it with a single sniper shot because the pilot had been completely unprepared for it. If only they could use that weakness...

“Well, things certainly turned out well that time.”

Kurz replied.

“As far as causing damage due to incompetence, it was impossible. We’ll probably only get one chance. That one shot will be decided upon, but I think we’ll have no choice but to aim at the cockpit.”

“What about the ‘slit on the back of the hips’ like where Sagara shot?”

Spake asked, and Mao groaned.

“There is that. However- it’s pretty conditional to say that they didn’t learn from their failure in Ariake, and yet have been planning for the past eight months to attack us, the same enemy they fought before.”

“That would be out of the question...”

“The enemy would have thought of countermeasures.”

“If so, it’s definitely the cockpit, then.”

“If you want something easy to aim at, then that’s an easy target. The cockpit on that giant is in the head. But the armor there isn’t shoddily done. It’s surrounded by double-layered composite armor, and the pilot is deep inside, several meters away from the

exterior. No matter what artillery or missiles we use, it would be impossible to take it down in one shot.”

But, the only chance they would get was that one shot.

And there were three of them.

“Even so, there has to be something we can do.” Clouseau said very patiently.

“We just need to gain enough time to escape. If we can turn three Behemoths into two, we might have that chance.

Nevertheless, by turning those two into one- the possibility of escape materially rises.”

“That might be hoping too much, though. But- at the very least, we might be able to take care of the first one... if we can thread the needle, that is.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Kurz told them-



Behemoth B crossed the designated line. The underwater alarm network and the few remaining sensors reported that to Kurz’s M9.

“Activate ECS invisibility mode...”

<Yes, Sergeant. ECS, on>

The unit’s ECS activated. The hologram, which arose through staggering the phases of multiple laser beams, concealed the machine from visible light, turning the M9 invisible.

Moving discretely, Kurz’s M9 left the underground shaft of the air-raid shelter.

The maneuvering grounds had been desolated by the bombs. The structures and trees had been leveled, and black smoke hung in thick clouds all around him. Nevertheless, Kurz didn't let down his guard. In order to avoid being detected by the enemy, the M9 crawled along the ground, holding a sniper-cannon, towards the small hill about 200 meters away- very carefully, and very slowly.

Using the landscape, now greatly reduced by the bombing, Kurz moved into perfect sniping position.

“This is Uruz 6. I've arrived at my station. All members of Team Red, report.”

“Uruz 5 [Sandarapta]. I'm ready whenever you are.”

“Uruz 10 [Mandela]. Twenty more seconds.”

Each of the other allies reported in. Because of the nature of the operation that was going to be carried out, Kurz had been given command of the offensive that would attack “Behemoth B”.

“Uruz 8 [Spake], can you do it?”

“This is Uruz 8. I don't have any choice, do I? ...I'm okay on this end.”

“Okay... well, in this book, we'll take that big bastard down in one shot.”

“Be a little more cool, Sergeant, for the readers.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

Kurz aimed his sniper cannon at the enemy AS in the distance. In the middle of the hazy black smoke, in the sea even further off the island's coast, he could see the Behemoth.

“Activate ‘fairy eyes’.”

<Roger. Activating ‘fairy eyes’>

The new model sensor equipped on Kurz's AS activated. A green image was projected on top of the figure of Behemoth, much like a night vision scope. It displayed the areas indicating the effectiveness of the enemy's Lambda Driver. This was new

equipment from December of the previous year. The developer hadn't been asked.

By using this equipment during the pirate suppression on Badamu Island, Kurz was able to observe when Sousuke's Arbalest used the Lambda Driver. Right now, the giant's "shield" had been slightly expanded to cover the entire body. Kurz was able to catch this by the "intensity" of the green on the screen. For the time being, it seemed that while the enemy remained cautious, it had plenty of confidence, and was about to move into the last stage of landing.

He switched the optics on the screen, and the Behemoth was advancing easily through the sea, which sparkled white in the sunlight.

Distance: 2,400 meters.

Wind, west-southwest, about twelve meters.

Atmospheric temperature, twenty-two degrees Celsius; humidity level, eighty-three percent.

Various environmental data was projected on the lower right hand section of the sniper mode screen. Kurz cut the commutations switch after a moment, then clicked his tongue.

"Damn it..."

His field of vision was poor- there was a touch of backlighting.

The wind, the atmospheric current... It was all very different from the ground to the ocean.

If he shot here, the ballistics would go astray. The enemy was also moving, left to right, and by no means at a steady pace. He couldn't read its movements.

He changed to firearms control mode, and aligned it to complete manual. The bilateral angle was at its worst. It would be impossible if he didn't aim with his own skills and intuition.

Damn... damn, damn!

It was too difficult. There were almost no people in the world that could successfully pull off this kind of shot. At this distance and under these conditions, shooting through the mark that appears after this- it exceeded the limits of his abilities.

But, he had no choice.

“What’s wrong, Kurz?” Spake said with ridicule in his voice. His M9 was hidden in the sea near the Behemoth. “Don’t tell me you’re playing around.”

“Ha, what are you babbling about?”

“If this goes well, I’ll make you rich.”

“Your stocks again?”

“Yeah. This whole affair made me think of it just now.

Starting sometime next week, the price of potatoes is going to go up for sure. If you give me five thousand dollars, I’ll turn it into twenty times that.”

At a time like this. That idiot.

“What does that giant bastard attacking us like that have to do with potatoes?”

“It would take too long to explain. So let’s fuck this bastard first.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“It’s a favor, okay? You can make a killing. I said it earlier, right? You can get a big house in Florida, with a Lotus and beautiful women in bathing suits.”

“I don’t care anything for a Lotus...”

“A Ferrari then.”

“That’s better.”

The enemy was coming closer to the designated line.

“This is Uruz 6 to all members of Team Red. The enemy will pass line D. Everyone ready?”

Everyone answered, “Ready anytime.”

“Countdown 5.”

He looked at the Behemoth on his screen again. It was bigger than before.

“4... 3...”

Drawing the strength from his shoulders, he easily moved the joystick -just barely, just enough to gently stroke a baby.

“2... 1...”

He mumbled shortly.

“Alpha, GO.”

Spake’s M9, which was hidden in the sea near the Behemoth, moved first. The underwater unit’s water jet started, suddenly propelling the AS above the ocean surface. Then, skipping like a stone, Spake’s M9 drew closer to the Behemoth. The giant reacted instantly, and half-turned its upper body towards Spake’s machine.

“Let’s go!”

As it sped across the top of the water, Spake’s M9 fired off a lot of rockets from the rocket launcher on its shoulder. They became speeding arrows of flame. One after another, they each hit the Behemoth- no, they detonated just before they hit, pale sparks scattering everywhere.

It was the Lambda Driver. It was stopping them. But that was the plan. They knew it from the “fairy eyes” images, too. The Behemoth turned in Spake’s direction, and the Lambda Driver’s force field was forming “strongly”.

“Beta, GO.”

“Beta, roger,” said the team members in charge of the self-propelled mines. At about the same time, an enormous waterspout rose on the opposite side of Spake.

It was an attack of self-propelled mines. A few minutes earlier, Mao had been successful doing this. However, it hadn't caused vital damage. The enemy had focused on the leg area, expanding the "force field". There was some damage, but it was more like a light brush for the Behemoth.

However-

The images from the "fairy eyes" on Kurz's AS clearly showed the direction of the enemy's force field- or, in other words, where the pilot's attention was focused. It was trying to attack Spake's machine, and the mines making a surprise attack from the opposite direction- the enemy was watching below it. It had its maximum force field spread out against any attacks from under or above the water's surface. In the green images, the dark color of the lower half of the body changed to the lighter color of the upper body.

And around the head-

We can do this.

Instantly changing the optics to sniper mode, Kurz yelled, "Gamma, GO!"

At his signal, three ally M9s, which were hidden in various places along the south coast of Merida Island, fired missiles called "Javelins".

This was the crucial moment.

An infrared guidance laser shone from the head of Kurz's M9. That laser point was aimed at the side of Behemoth B's head, and the three missiles rushed towards it. These weren't old-style missiles which poked their way along slower than the speed of sound; these were large missiles which destroyed the enemy using ultra high speed kinetic energy.

That tenth of a second lasted an eternity.

Those three missiles hit Behemoth's head at about the same time. Fragments of armor suddenly flew out, and white smoke spread out over the shockwave. The huge body only staggered a little. Because Kurz was such a long distance away, the sound of the explosions hadn't reached him yet.

No.

It would have been too late by the time he did hear it. Kurz only really had but a few seconds. The point of impact was covered in smoke and he couldn't see. He had to guess as to how much "escaped", as well as the angle and position. He was relying only on his intuition.

Calmly. Mostly automatically.

The area was hit by the three missiles. He aimed at the shaking, moving hole, only a few dozen centimeters across, almost 2,400 meters away, on the other side of smoke, air, and wind.

He fired.

A dart-like piercing object flew from the sniper cannon of the hidden M9. It produced a pure-white blaze before his eyes, and the black smoke which surrounded him suddenly spread out from the blow to the atmosphere. The sound of the missiles' impact in the distance immediately followed.

When the blow from the sniper cannon hit, the Behemoth staggered slightly again on the screen. But Kurz couldn't tell whether or not it had hit the place he had aimed for.

"Did it work...?"

For a little while, the Behemoth didn't move, as white smoke rose from its head. It stood there silently in that spot.

The giant slowly leaned over- but didn't fall.

The Behemoth was still alive. Covering its partially destroyed head, it continued on, aiming its black gun turret in Kurz's direction.

It fired.

Kurz quickly got his machine up and jumped. A moment later, there was a violent explosion under his feet. The shockwave caught his M9 and flipped him in the air.

“Shit!”

He’d failed. The Behemoth’s head had received enough damage, but it hadn’t reached down far enough to kill the pilot inside.

Opening the missile launcher on its shoulders, the Behemoth fired numerous ground to ground missiles at his allies. Sandarapta and the others tried to attack and take evasive maneuvers.

Explosions went up here and there in succession along the south coast. Kurz didn’t know what had become of the others. Half of them may have been crushed.

Somehow Kurz managed to regain his balance in time to make a landing, but was attacked yet again.

There were enormous flames in the distance. The shells were coming.

Although he barely avoided these, the shock and vibration made him feel dizzy. If he had been an ordinary pilot, it would have knocked him out.

Annihilation.

This word came to his mind. It was impossible after all, wasn’t it? They would be trampled helplessly like this against an enemy with overwhelming firepower.

The muzzle of the enemy’s gun caught sight of Kurz for a third time as his M9 tottered on both knees in the midst of falling dirt and smoke. It was no use any longer. There was no way he could dodge it...

“Uruz 6, don’t give up yet,” he heard Spake yell sharply over the wireless radio. On the screen he saw the Behemoth in the sea. Right beside it, he saw Spake’s M9 kicking up sheets of spray as it moved at high speed over the water.

That idiot. Why hadn’t he run away and hidden? He would be murdered by the thirty millimeter cannon.

Spake’s M9 had already fired all of its rockets. Behemoth stopped as it was about to fire at Kurz, and transferred its attention to Spake’s machine.

It expanded its force field, then scattered rockets in all directions.

Spake wasn’t panicked by this. He probably understood everything now. He rushed at the giant, same as before, blowing off his underwater unit. As soon as he was free of it, he used that momentum to fly in the air for just a moment, and then jumped at the Behemoth’s enormous left leg, which was more than five times the size of an M9.

Kurz couldn’t hear anything, because it was too far away. Besides, there was a terrible ringing in his ears from the second attack.

“I’m going to make another chance for you.”

Taking out the monomolecular cutter used for hand-to-hand combat, Spake’s M9 violently thrust it into the enemy’s armor and ran up the large body in almost an instant. It was a move that took more than average skill. There were probably only a handful of people in the world who could pull such a feat off in an AS.

“Stop it, Spake.”

Hanging on to the Behemoth’s shoulder, Spake’s M9 seized the revolving carbine rifle, and fired on full-auto at the enemy’s head- in the area that had been half-destroyed by the other four attacks. All of those bullets were destroyed by the Lambda

Driver's defense shield. Pale light and red sparks gushed forth, creating a deep shadow on the Behemoth's right shoulder.

"Doing something like this isn't like me, though."

"That's enough already. Run away!"

The Behemoth groaned. It looked like it was feeling... anger.

"Tell the Captain I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

The images captured with the "fairy eyes" showed as the enemy's shield shone brightly. No, it wasn't a shield anymore. An overwhelming power full of directivity aimed at the annoying Spake and attacked.

"Spake!!"

Spake's M9 was blown away off the Behemoth's shoulder. Its arms were torn off, its legs contorted, and the body was crushed- the entire thing crumbled into pieces. It slowly scattered in all directions, falling into the sea. The pilot was dead. That much was very clear.

The thirty millimeter machine gun on the Behemoth's head was still volley firing into the sea where the wreckage fell.

You filthy worm. I'll show you your place.

That's what the giant seemed to be saying.

It was only a few moments.

This is what the "fairy eyes" showed him. The enemy had its attention completely focused in the direction of the falling wreckage of Spake's M9. Kurz saw a hole in the shield- on the head, on the side of the head. All of the data displayed on the screen instantly ran through his head.

The wind, light, temperature and humidity.

All of the conditions gave him the go sign to "kill it".

He fired.

This time the second shot hit the Behemoth's head. It passed through the hole in the armor, and then, inside- it flew clean through into the cockpit, where the nameless and faceless pilot was sitting.

The Behemoth stopped.

White smoke rose.

Finally, just like it did in Ariake, the giant started to shake.

The arms went limp, dropping the huge gun into the water. It began to lose all of its armor.

Dragged down by its own weight, the Behemoth's body contorted, and collapsed vertically in on itself.

One was destroyed.

But they had sustained serious losses.

Of Sandarapta's group, which had fired the missiles from land, two ASes had been destroyed in the counterattack immediately following, and Sandarapta was seriously injured.

Also-

“Spake, you dumbass-” he finally mumbled.

If only his first shot had hit. If only he hadn't missed.

But he didn't have time to bask in the feelings of self-condemnation before Mao radioed in.

“This is Uruz 2. I have serious damage to my right leg. I can still avoid him, but- I don't have long. I'm going to try and stop him somehow.”

“Mao...!”

At the same time, his unit's AI reported. The enemy's air troops were closing in.



When he thought about it just a little bit more calmly, Kaname Chidori's assertions were correct. She was completely right.

Saving Kyouko Tokiwa and everyone else in the school without surrendering was no longer "difficult". It was more like "impossible".

By choosing the foolish gamble here, the probability of success was small. Despite this, if this were a western or something, the cavalry would unexpectedly show up and lend a hand, and the one percent possibility would be realized. Such a miracle was convention for them. Therefore the protagonists would indiscreetly choose the "pretty" choice, and wait for good results to happen.

Sousuke was different. He had grown up in a world set completely apart from such hopes.

As an assassin; as a guerrilla; as a mercenary.

For example, which choice would be the most logical?

There was a ninety-nine percent chance that sacrificing one person would save ninety-nine others. And while it was possible to save the one person and ninety-nine others at the same time, it was a mere one percent chance.

What was the wise choice?

It was obvious.

She was right. Completely right.

But at the same time, Sousuke Sagara had one more proposition.

What if the value of the lives of those ninety-nine and the one to be sacrificed were equal?

If you offered just that one person, then it would be okay to allow everything in the world to be destroyed- and if you assumed such a standpoint, then what?

Of course the ninety-nine were very important. They were irreplaceable. However, that “one person” was also irreplaceable.

Think about it.

Should he raise the white flag, and give her up?

He couldn’t do that.

He didn’t have that kind of courage. If you could even call that courage.

Mathematically, it was a conundrum. Before, it would have been an absolutely simple problem. Now, he was being hit by a terrible dilemma.

He wanted to bet on that one percent.

It was a terrible temptation.

It was a temptation that would overcome anyone, right?

The former him would have probably scorned the him now. But he couldn’t do it anymore. This might have been what it was to love something, Souseki thought vaguely. The extremely irrational, foolish people he had met before now, he now understood their feelings so much it hurt.

A girl student who went mad with jealousy and wrote slander on the bathroom walls. A member of the basketball team so afraid of losing a game that she sent a threatening fax. A teacher with such strong feelings for another colleague that she forgets her place and causes a big scene.

Who could blame them?

The reason was clear. It was because they loved something. It was because they were afraid.

That was it.

Who could blame them?

At that time, could Souseki have reasonably asked himself that- he didn’t even know.

But he gave in to the temptation for the results.

He bet on the one percent.

“There’s no time. Let’s go...” Kaname mumbled feebly as she started to make her way to the designated location. Sousuke made his way over to her back, taking out his stun gun. Moving to grab her from behind, he pressed it against her abdomen and pressed the switch.

Electric current passed. There were minor convulsions.

Soon, Kaname could no longer move.

He quickly supported her as she collapsed, grabbing her with both hands, and laying her down. He chose a tranquilizer out of his medical kit and, with an experienced hand, gave her the shot. This would keep her asleep for several hours. He then carried her to the top of a water tower on the roof of an apartment building, laying his jacket covered in blood and mud over her. He searched her pockets and took out her phone.

Suppressing the urge to caress her pale cheek, he stood up and turned around.

“Let’s go, Al.”

<Roger.>, replied the AI of the Arbalest- the Arm Slave which was bent down on one knee on standby. Sousuke stepped on the armor’s ledge, and after quickly climbing up the machine, he slipped down into the cockpit.

<Sergeant. I have a question.>

“What is it?”

<Are you leaving Miss Chidori here?>

“Oh, that. Forget about it,” Sousuke answered shortly. “We’re going to Jindai High School. We’re going to find the bombs and disable them.”

<It is not like I can understand all of the tactical circumstances, but your choice is a mistake.>

“Is that right?”

<It is obviously an unreasonable choice. It might even be called malignant. I suggest reconsidering.>

“Refused.”

<Even if the explosives are disarmed, the enemy can keep repeating the same strategy.>

“We’ll stop them no matter how many times they try.”

<That is impossible.>

“I’ll make it possible.”

<That is impossible.>

Impossible. Unreasonable. Pointless. A bad decision.

Would she forgive him?

Probably not.

Even so-

“I don’t know what else to do.”

Sousuke grabbed the Arbalest’s joystick, and made the machine stand up. The AS ran through the vacant parking lot and leapt.

He left behind the sleeping Kaname.

Moving through town areas with the same skill as always, Sousuke went several kilometers, and then stopped the Arbalest again.

He rearranged himself to where he only took up half of the cockpit, then, using his free hand, operated Kaname’s phone. As he didn’t have much experience doing so, it was difficult for him to use the ten-odd keys required to compose a text message.

“Your threats were effective on Kaname Chidori, but they mean nothing to me. It does not impede my mission no matter how many people at Jindai High School die. There will be no negotiations about handing over the top-secret AS. Furthermore, I have been instructed to kill Kaname Chidori as it has been judged

too dangerous to allow her to work for the enemy. Call this phone. If you do not reply within three minutes, I will carry out my orders.”

Send.

He didn’t have to wait long. The phone rang less than a minute later.

“What are your demands?” said a man’s electronically-altered voice.

“I want you to guarantee my safety, as well as an escape route. With the place and time that you have designated, there is no guarantee of safety.”

“You don’t seem to understand, do you? Should I blow up one of the bombs in the school?”

A chill ran up his spine, but Sousuke exercised superhuman self-control, and feigning perfect indifference, said, “Then negotiations are at an end. Do as you wish.”

He hung up.

Sousuke watched the LCD screen and waited. If the enemy was serious, he would start negotiating. Sousuke wasn’t the only difficulty. The enemy- he was no doubt very worried that Sousuke and Kaname would somehow find a way to escape. It could be said that taking Kyouko Tokiwa and the school hostage was a pretty desperate move.

It was a very long few seconds.

The phone rang again.

He resisted the urge to press the button right away; then after a moment, he answered.

“If we can secure Kaname Chidori, that will be enough.”

“I wonder.”

“We have no interest in the AS. But it is a threat. If you can just guarantee that the AS will be temporarily disabled, then I can promise your safety.”

“Very well. Then at 2200 hours, I will move the AS to the closed factory on the second block in Sengawa. There, I will open the hatch and wait. You can have someone watch me. Kaname Chidori will be alone facing Sengawa Station, two kilometers away. After the exchange, I will disappear.”

There was a short pause. After thinking over these conditions, the other party replied, “Fine. But if it even looks like things aren’t going according to plan even just a little, I’ll detonate all the bombs in the school.”

“Like I said before, that’s not a threat.”

“I wonder.” The man on the other end gave a short laugh. “I’ve also lost around ten of my subordinates. We’re both pros, but I can’t help wanting to make you suffer.”

“I’m not interested,” Sousuke said quietly as he felt the sweat rise on his back.

“It’s just like Mr. Iron said. You’re an interesting brat.”

“If you’re just interested in idle talk, then I’m done.”

He hung up. The enemy was probably already piecing together his location, and would be forced to rush either the reconnaissance party or the assault party.

“We’re moving, Al.”

<Roger>

He closed the hatch, then reinstated piloting mode. The Arbalest ran invisibly through the gloomy lead-colored streets.

He had regained the initiative to some extent.

Even if it was only temporarily.

After this, the climax of the gamble would take place. The enemy definitely wasn’t bluffing when they said they would kill Kyouko and the others. They were serious.

He had to do something.

All by himself.

Chapter 4: Damage Assessment

Inside the violently shaking cockpit, the voices of Mao and the AI, as well as the sounds of numerous alarms, were flying around in disarray.

<Damage report. Class B damage to right thigh area. Activated ADC (Automated Damage Control System) and AML (Active Motion Limitation System)>

“Cancel AML.”

<Roger. AML off. Waiving protection of the damaged area>

“How much longer will it last?”

<Question. The specific area has->

“I meant the damaged area.”

<Estimated between 45 and 160 seconds. Recommend immediate suspension of battle maneuvers>

“There’s no time.”

The 30mm bullets that the enemy had shot into the right leg of Mao’s AS had damaged the muscle package of the thigh and part of the shock absorption system. The muscle package, just as the name implied, was the muscles of the AS. With conductive shape memory plastic twisted into coils of fiber, the joints could be maneuvered with the flexibility of the human body.

The “muscle” of the right leg was starting to tear due to the damage and the load it had to carry. The micro fibers were being torn off one by one, and eventually the entire thing would fracture all at once. If that happened, this machine wouldn’t even be able to walk in front of the enemy. The bundle of muscle that the right femur was gradually losing- this was Mao’s only lifeline right now.

The machine's AI was suggesting prioritizing protecting the damaged area, but Mao turned it down. Other than abusing the almost-broken right femur, there was no other way of hiding from the enemy's attacks.

<I recommend immediate withdrawal from the battle area>

“Run away? Hah, where in the world would I go-”

<Missile alert. Four o'clock, distance four, three missiles>

A remarkably loud alarm rang out. Three smokeless missiles were approaching from Behemoth A, which was nearing the beach.

“Kuh!!”

The M9 stopped suddenly from a full-out sprint, throwing up a cloud of earth and dust as it skidded across the scorched earth on its left foot. There was a violent impact. She felt as if her internal organs were about to rush out of her body. The missiles altered their course a little; they were headed straight for the M9's head. She fired the head-mounted machine gun at full-auto.

Because they were caseless rounds, there wasn't a cartridge. She issued forth a barrage of depleted uranium bullets. One missile blew up. The seeker portion of another missile was blown off, and it lost its guidance system.

The last missile had made it that far, so she had no choice but to evade. After a sharp step to the right, the machine, using all of its power, jumped in the opposite direction. The damaged right leg gave out a scream as it was further burdened. The missile barely damaged Mao's machine as it hit the surface.

The duration of the flight was short. Mao's M9 plunged into smoke, tracing a low parabola, and leapt towards the burning jungle. She wanted to land on her legs, but she was worried about the damaged area. Twisting the AS, she landed by rolling forward on the left arm. The 10-ton machine mowed down all kinds of trees

as it rolled over, and Mao blacked out from the merciless shock and gyration.

But there wasn't any time to rest. The same alarm hit her ears again.

<Missile alert. Eleven o'clock. Distance three, three missiles>

Three more missiles were approaching. And Behemoth A was also firing its machine gun.



And the crisis continues. Behemoth fires three missiles. The violent shock runs at Mao's machine.

It wasn't even giving her any time to stop and attack. She jumped up as she rolled along the ground, setting off again, exchanging fire with the enemy. The "muscles" in the right thigh, despite the fact that they were already tearing, had gone strange. She left the irregular, random maneuvers to the computer. It was a flat contest between it and the enemy's motion prediction

programs. It kept after the running M9, barraging the AS's surroundings with countless shells.

The three missiles drew nearer. She attacked as she ran, which messed up her alignment, and she barely managed to destroy one of them. While her ECS was functioning at its highest capacity, she jumped back. The veil of pale light left a trail. She changed the electromagnetic camouflage system to stealth, and the two remaining missiles lost their target.

The missiles exploded. It was a narrow escape. Looking as if it were falling on its backside, Mao's M9 sank down to the earth.

“Uh...”

But the crisis wasn't over. Behemoth A was aiming at her even now. If she didn't move soon, she would end up like a beehive. She got up using the jackknife maneuver, and tried to jump yet again.

But she couldn't. Her AS didn't have the power.

Using the power-hungry ECS and performing battle maneuvers at the same time had momentarily emptied the condenser power. It would need ten seconds to charge back up.

Also, the muscle package in the right thigh had finally broken. She could no longer even stand up.

Damn it.

She cursed as she crawled. Mao's cornered M9 could only move away on its back through the mud.

She had nothing left. She had used up all of the weapons she could control remotely by using the ITCC-5. Now that the Behemoth had reached land, the self-propulsion mines were useless. The land mines buried along the beach had long ago been blown up by the persistent bombing.

Raising the only weapon she had left- a 40mm rifle, over her head, she shot on full auto. It was no good. It just wasn't effective. Everything was deflected.

The giant Behemoth loomed closer like a mountain.

The enormous silhouette blotted out the sky. Its armor was dripping large amounts of ocean water. It was an overwhelming, completely overwhelming, violent image.

The Behemoth pointed its huge gun at Mao's machine, and was soon dissuaded. It probably perceived it as a waste of ammunition. It calmly proceeded on without change, raising its right foot over the struggling M9.

It was planning to crush the M9 all at once. Slaughter the AS like a human soldier.

This is it, huh? Shit.

Facing a hopeless death, Mao was curiously relieved to find awakening within her more chagrin than dread, more of an inexhaustible fighting spirit than desperation. She was proud that she didn't let out a shameful scream of terror. The life she had led from the Marines to her current one as a soldier wasn't a waste- so she believed. At the very least, she thought, I wasn't the kind of "girl" the guys would laugh at behind my back. I was able to prove it.

Viscid mud and ocean water rained down incessantly from the sole of the foot, which was almost the size of a tennis court, all over Mao's M9. She couldn't see the sky at all. There was no escape. Just the sole of the enemy's foot, which had now become an enormous press machine, was all that filled her vision.

Impact.

In a moment, the M9's armor would be crushed, flattening the cockpit, turning the pilot into mush. Would there even be time to feel any pain-

No.

She shut her eyes tight, but the moment she prepared for never came.

Her AS was being carried by another M9, riding fast across the ground. She soon understood. It was Lieutenant Castero's AS. He had rescued her machine at the last moment from the Behemoth's foot, which had been coming down like a hammer. At the same time, shots had been fired in the vicinity of the Behemoth's head, and had scattered in all directions. It was Kurz's AS sniping at it. It couldn't see where he was shooting from.

Kurz and the rest of them had taken care of one Behemoth, and had somehow come to her rescue-

“Are you alive, Mao?” Castero's voice rang out over the radio. His M9, which was reflected on her screen, was in terrible shape. The head was half-destroyed, the shoulder armor had been blown off, and the left arm was missing below the wrist. Their speed of movement was discouraging, due to him carrying Mao's mostly immobile M9.

“No Lieutenant, any second now-”

Despite Kurz's support, the angry Behemoth started to spray them with its machine gun. He took evasive maneuvers, but couldn't avoid it. A number of 30mm bullets scored direct hits, knocking off pieces of armor plating. Castero's AS lost its balance, and the two machines tangled up as they went tumbling.

“U...!”

Kurz persistently fired as Behemoth A moved in for the kill. He was far from mortally wounding it, but to the enemy, it was probably a fairly annoying attack. The Behemoth let out a roar, and pointed the howitzer it was holding at Kurz.

The barrel of that huge gun-

The bullets fired from Kurz's gun plunged into it.

It was a miraculous shot, exactly like threading a needle. Sparks flew. The barrel warped, the shell deep within the mechanism detonated, and there was a large explosion in the Behemoth's hand. It staggered around, dropping the gun. Numerous trees were crushed as the howitzer landed on the ground of Merida Island, along with a thunderous crash.

"Heh, I got 'em again. Damn simpletons..." Kurz said, his voice full of contempt.

But despite being deprived of its main weapon, Behemoth A still had a very powerful machine gun. Kurz was at his limit for covering the others.

Castero's machine could still move, so using all of his power, he tossed Mao's AS behind a nearby rock, then jumped away as soon as he turned around.

"I'll lure him off. Abandon your unit and run to the base."

"Don't do it or—"

"That's an order, Lieutenant!"¹

And without leaving any room for argument, Castero's battered AS went to face the Behemoth alone.



They should have assigned us to our enemies the other way around-

Clouseau gritted his teeth as he moved his M9 left and right in his attempt to draw in Behemoth C. This rocky area had considerably more places to hide than the area on the north coast where Mao had fought. His machine still had power, ammunition, and he still had the ability to think.

He was fit to give aid to Mao and the others, but he would be no help. He had his hands full with this enemy, who was

noticing that Clouseau was by himself. The bluff was almost at an end.

Far off in the distance, he could see ten-odd large enemy helicopters landing one by one on the western shore of the island. Now that the defense systems were destroyed, there was no chance of stopping them.

Clouseau adjusted his grip on his controller.

“Move ZA-3 into parallel position. Fire-at-will at Behemoth C.”

<Roger>

An unmanned M6 waiting on standby in a rocky area 800 meters away- his last one, began firing super-high speed missiles at the Behemoth. The enemy’s attention was diverted, and

Clouseau’s M9, Falke, quickly jumped from its hiding place, firing its rifle as it ran at full speed.

He then received a transmission from Lieutenant Commander Kalinin at the command center.

“This is Headquarters to Uruz 1. About how much longer can you distract Behemoth C?”

“Five minutes at the most.”

“...Understood. When you can no longer hold him off, return to base. There is hand-to-hand combat going through the cellars.”

“They might use BC weapons.”

If they pumped chemical weapons like Sarin or Tabun into the underground base, they would have no trouble gaining total control of all of the officers. This enemy hadn’t shown any compassion for humanity with anything they had done up to now.

“I know. If they take away the air-conditioning facilities in area C3, it’s all over. We are gathering all of our fighting potential. Concentrate on your opponent for now.”

“Roger.”



Destroyed. Shot down. Emergency landing. Serious damage. Fires breaking out. Minor injuries. Serious injuries. Critical condition. Dead. MIA. Contact impossible.

Tessa, as the commanding officer, was carpet bombed by such reports as these. Whenever she received a report, she would give instructions without any change in expression, then rearrange everything around in her head.

Even when she heard that Spake was dead, she quickly assessed the loss of “one M9” and “one skilled pilot”, revised the fighting power they still had, then, based on that, reworked the situation and counter-measures she expected from then on.

That was really all she thought about when it came to his death.

The much bigger loss that went along with that, though- his spiteful talk, cynical smiling face, the way he had been standing to attention with all his heart in the end- the reality that he wouldn’t be coming back again was something that she kept completely locked from her face.

“Captain-” Kalinin reported.

The enemy’s landing force had arrived on the island’s west coast ten minutes later than she had anticipated, thanks to the destruction of Behemoth B. Although it was one out of three, it must have been very detrimental to the enemy. Those ten minutes, along with the emotional damage, were very precious resources in the current situation.

It would be another ten minutes before the landing force could penetrate underground; thirty minutes at most if they were

held up by traps. The base's ground troops could put up a good fight, but how long could they hold out? And how much loss would come of it?

“Captain-” reported Mardukas, who was supervising the maintenance in the underground dock.

He said that it would be two and a half hours until the attack submarine *Tuatha De Danaan* would be completely ready to put out to sea.

The biggest problem was the reloading work on the palladium reactor's fuel pellet, which was the power source of the ship. It was possible to give up on this, but- if they did leave without finishing, the ship would only last a few weeks until it would no longer be able to move. If they got caught in a bad situation, then it might be even less. The palladium reactor was different from the usual nuclear reactors used in warships, which could operate without supplies for more than ten years, in that it had “run out of fuel”. If they completed the reloading work that was taking place right now, the *de Danaan* would be able to stay submerged for up to eight months (if you left out the food for the crew, that is).

But the palladium reactor wasn't the only problem. If they went out to sea without completing repairs to the compressors which controlled the compressed air essential to the ship's controls, they would make potentially lethal noise under certain conditions. And there was still about a 40 percent chance of loading all sorts of supplies, including food.

It would be two and a half hours until the *de Danaan* was at least in proper condition.

That's what Mardukas was telling her. If they finished normal operations, they definitely wouldn't be able to shorten it anymore than that.

Two and a half hours.

Could they hold out that long?

It's impossible.

Drowning men have no time to worry about the coast they crawl up on. She quickly gave Mardukas instructions.

“Stop reloading the reactor, and stop repairs on the compressor. Transfer the remaining crew to inspecting for water leaks.”

“...so that's all we can do. Understood.”

There was a bitter edge in Mardukas' voice over the phone, but it didn't seem that he had any objections.

Probably overhearing the orders Tessa had given, Kalinin looked at her.

“Captain?”

“We won't last that long, will we? For two and a half hours, I mean.”

Kalinin was silent for a moment, then said “Unfortunately, no.”

It was strange.

Most people probably wouldn't have noticed, but Kalinin was acting differently than usual today. It wasn't that his orders or directions were strange. No matter how you looked at it, his command was nothing more than quick and accurate.

But something wasn't right.

Was it shock?

It might be. But a veteran officer formerly of the Russian Special Forces like him had probably passed through many scenes of even more horrific carnage. The situation right now was also pretty horrific, but she didn't believe that was the reason he was disturbed. This man, someone who had been schooled in adversity, was possessed of a cool-head as well as a steel will that separated

him from ordinary people- he especially shouldn't have been upset at a time like this.

When Tessa looked at him, he appeared to be-
Hesitant.

Yes, hesitant. For Kalinin, there appeared to be something, an even bigger dilemma, an even bigger proposition that was weighing on his mind. Something beyond even the problems currently confronting this base.

It was as if he were watching something in the distant past, while staring into an ashen future at the same time.

“Lieutenant Commander...?”

“Excuse me, Captain. We must do what we can, but-”

Just then, they received a communication from Kurz, who was in the middle of battle.

“Uruz 6 to Headquarters. I’m currently fighting Behemoth A-” There was no trace of the energy or vitality that was usually in his voice. “Behemoth A’s main weapons are just about useless. The Howitzer’s been destroyed, and it seems the Avenger^{*2} is just about out. As for other missiles and stuff, as far as I can confirm, there doesn’t seem to be any left. However...”

This should have been good news, but his voice sounded stricken and destitute. Before they could ask why, Kurz said, “However, Uruz 3 was destroyed. That old fart Castero is dead. He took a lot of 30mm bullets from point-blank range, and was smashed to pieces in the hands of the Behemoth. I can confirm it.”

“...Headquarters, roger that. Good work, and return to base,” Kalinin said.

“No. I can see the enemy landing party. I don’t have much ammunition left, but- after I’ve stopped them the best I can, I’ll return to base.”

“That won’t be necessary. Hurry back.”

“Thank you, Tessa. But, well, I want to try and hold out a little longer. If I don’t, then...”

Kurz gave a sigh over the radio.

“If I don’t, then I won’t be able to face them, you see? I also don’t know what’s happened to Mao, so... well, take care.”

“Weber!?”

And before Tessa could stop him, Kurz cut the transmission.



A helicopter traversed the chilly Tokyo skies.

The information captured by the Arbalest’s dual sensors showed that the helicopter belonged to the police department. Four kilometers west there was a helicopter belonging to a newspaper. He could hear the sirens of police cars in the distance. Also-infrared sensors, which could see long distances that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, told him that transport helicopters carrying the ASes of the ground self-defense forces were on standby while they flew their normal routes.

Right now western Tokyo was in a grand scale panic, shaken by unidentified fighting.

Everything was because of the mess he and the enemy had created. But the city appeared to be carefree despite all of this. It was different from Kabul or Beirut. Most people, despite their anxiety, were going on with life as usual.

But that wasn’t right. That wasn’t it.

The school was different.

Sousuke piloted the Arbalest, jumping from building to building, cautiously taking a route that led to Jindai High School. Even more than before, he had no intention of giving up this machine.

He moved the Arbalest to the closed factory in Sengawa at eleven o'clock, then put it on standby with the hatch open-

That was the agreement he had made with the enemy over the phone, but Sousuke had no intention of honoring his promise. The other side probably wouldn't, either. They probably would use every means available to be sure to overpower him. Torture, drugs, lie detectors. After that, who knew what.

What Sousuke had gained with that agreement was time.

He had at least been able to stop the enemy's reckless violence until eleven o'clock. That much was very important. Of course, they were probably aware of that, too. It wasn't a sense of honor keeping them from pressing the button to blow everything up. They wanted the time to make preparations to seize that one person. Now that the police and media were all over the place, it had become even harder to move around than before. Sousuke had the power to take out two or three patrol cars, but not enough to take out fifty.

He had to quickly give up on the idea of having the Arbalest try to find the bombs. When he had tried some reconnaissance from a distance, just as Kaname had bitterly remarked, it seemed the enemy had cast a heavy net. Optical sensors, infrared sensors, ultra-broadband radars. And of course, human surveillance.

Even though he was using ECS, if Sousuke had come near, he would have been detected.

He couldn't use the Arbalest to find the bombs.

The AS.

What if...

After he had moved to the roof of an office building one kilometer north of the school and carefully scanned his surroundings with the passive sensors, Sousuke said, "Al."

<Yes, Sergeant>

“If you were on full autopilot mode, what’s the shortest amount of time it would take you to get from here to Jindai High School?”

<About 40 seconds>

“And after you had gotten there, how long could you run the anti-aircraft ECM (Electronic Counter Measures) at full-power?”

<This is approximating depending on the situation, but around 150 seconds>

“...”

After Sousuke did some simple calculations in his head, he pressed the button to open the cockpit hatch. He took a submachine gun, handheld radio, and digital map from the rack on the other side, then nimbly got out of the AS.

“Maintain ECS. Keep watch on standby in Mode 4. Come as soon as I call you. The coordinates are-”

He read off the display of the digital map, denoting coordinates and several establishments.

<Roger. Closing hatch>

The Arbalest’s chest area slid, and the hatch closed with a “clang”. When Sousuke started to turn his back on the still transparent machine and make his way toward the roof’s exit, Al called after him.

<Sergeant>

“What is it?”

<Please don’t leave me here like this>

Sousuke raised an eyebrow at Al’s strange words.

“I said ‘I’ll call you later’, didn’t I? I’m not leaving you. You’re on standby.”

<Roger>

“Why did you say such a thing?”

<Because I have a feeling>

“A feeling?”

<A feeling that we will be parted>



Mao, who had abandoned her machine and escaped carrying a submachine gun in one hand as she ran through the burning jungle, knew nothing of the loss of her ally.

Her entire body was soaking wet, as well as caked in mud.

But she ran. Somehow she would make it to the base. That was the only thing she could do right now.

Although it was a solitary island in the distant seas, Merida Island was quite vast, about as wide as the heart of Tokyo. And there was little terrain that an injured pilot could pass through unhindered.

She jumped over the roots of a huge tree, then plunged into a small river. Choking on the thick smoke, she plowed through the muddy water.

Overhead there were the sounds of jet helicopters. They were not the Pave Mares of her allies. They were transport helicopters; more than likely, it was the sound of Super Stallions.

Were they looking for her?

No, they weren’t. The enemy’s objective was to take control of the base. They didn’t have the time to worry about a single person like her. She climbed up the bank of the river, cut through the grass, and trying to brush aside ivy that wrapped around her, tried to aim for southeast.

But she didn't even know that direction. It was a pitiful thing, but she couldn't get her bearings without a compass in this jungle, which was almost like a backyard to her.

And there was also this bushfire.

It was hard to breathe. Her entire body hurt. If she encountered the enemy in this state, she would die.

Spraining her knee had become a habit ever since she injured it long ago- and escaping from the damaged AS earlier had done it again. Every step she took was torture.

Where's the base? I need ammunition.

I can still fight.

In a daze, she stumbled along an animal trail, where she met a white tiger.

It had a very supple body. The design was beautiful, as if it had been drawn with India ink on rice paper, without leaving a single spot or stain. The figure floated there dimly from across the smoke-filled forest.

Is this a hallucination?

She thought as she rubbed her eyes. But when she did, the tiger jumped easily, disappearing into the windward direction. The retreating figure seemed to be saying "Follow me" to Mao.

"Damn..."

She gritted her teeth, and clinging to the nearby brush, set off after the phantom.



He would probably not be able to get close until the last moment.

However, it would be almost impossible to sneak into the school under the strict surveillance by the enemy. Maybe if it were

before or after school, but right now everyone was in class. A person approaching the hushed school building would be conspicuous to anyone.

So trying that step was out.

So, how would he find all of the explosives that the enemy had hidden? Bombs arranged here and there all over the school. There were a number of valid locations. He didn't know how many in all, or how to accurately find them.

And it wasn't as if there was such a way to do it in the first place.

No matter how much time he had, he would only be able to disable one bomb by himself.

He wouldn't be able to dismantle all of them at once.

Unless-

Sousuke, who had made it to the corner of the shopping district several hundred meters from the school, ran to a telephone booth. He opened Kaname's cell phone, found the appropriate number in her address book, then quickly dialed it on the pay phone.

“The number you have dialed is temporarily unavailable. Please try again later.”

That's right. They were in the middle of class over there. Even so, Sousuke tried again.

“The number you have dialed is temporarily-”

It was the same. He hung up and tried again. The electronic voice patiently repeated its message. The tone of it was almost irritating.

“The number you have dialed is-”

“...hello?”

Finally, he had reached him. It was the calm, deep voice of a man.

“Sir, I have a favor to ask,” Sousuke said without any sort of greeting, and after just a short moment, the other person-Hayashimizu, said, “There’s trouble, isn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“Understood. What do you want me to do?” he replied without asking for details of any kind. Sousuke swallowed once, then explained what he wanted.

“That’s a lot to ask. I could get suspended.”

“It’s necessary.”

“It’s okay, I was just joking. I’d be glad to.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a problem. But-”

Hayashimizu gave a small sigh.

“-this means goodbye, doesn’t it?”

“...more than likely.”

“I see. Take care, then. ...I enjoyed these past ten months with you. I really did.”

“So did I. It was fun.”

“Please go ahead and tell her to take care for me. And that I will help in any way I can.”

“I will.”

“Good luck.”

He hung up, leaving the monotonous sound of the dial tone ringing in the receiver.



That man- Kurama, didn’t find any considerable meaning or significance in blowing up one ordinary school.

He was a large man. He had short-cropped hair, grey stubble, and was wearing small, round glasses.

Kurama was a mercenary. He wasn't particular about battle tactics, but that didn't mean he went in for easy-going cruelty, or swung the other way towards humanism.

He would do anything that needed to be done.

That was all.

And Kurama's experience, along with his own feelings, said unanimously:

There's no need for mercy. Blow it up.

Dealing with vague correspondence was, in and of itself, inviting trouble later on. Any kind of word could function as an agreement. Beyond intimidation, if you couldn't practice it, there was no point.

But that wasn't all. For Kurama, who had lost a number of his subordinates due to Sousuke's resistance, there was a right to retribution. No- at the very least, that's what he himself thought.

After considering everything like that...

Kurama felt no concern at all with pushing to button to blow it up.

That was fine.

That man should suffer more.

That was the extent of Kurama's feelings.

"Has the white AS shown up?" he asked one of his subordinates, who was waiting at the closed factory, over the radio. The man gave a little groan.

"No, not yet."

"Understood."

He quietly took the safety off of the detonator switch he held in his hand. Once they received the electromagnetic waves that corresponded to the code oscillating from this device, the bombs hidden in eight areas around the school would blow up at the same time.



Just a push of the thumb. Then it would be finished.

After that, he didn't know.

Fight, kill. Just like always. There was no hesitation.

Just then, a member of the surveillance team entered. "The fire alarms are going off in the school," he said.

That was probably Sousuke Sagara's handiwork. He had recruited someone inside the school to sound the alarm.

But- if he did, how could this kind of evacuation be useful? How long did he think that more than a thousand high school students, who only practiced fire drills once a year, would take until they were completely evacuated from the building? Even though this was the only switch.

A microphone stopped the commotion. Shrill bells reverberated throughout the area. Then there was a broadcast inside the school, to further pound the issue.

"Testing, testing. This is the student council," the person said in a calm voice. "A serious situation has broken out in the north school building. The current student council aide- yes, just as you thought, *him*- some chemical weapons that he had brought with him have leaked due to an unfortunate accident. Please evacuate to the schoolyard within 100 seconds. If you are even a little bit late, you will die. Please hurry."

Chemical weapons? That was ridiculous. A story like that wouldn't work in a normal high school, would it? Saying "There's a fire" would be much more rational.

Sousuke Sagara. Was this your strategy?

Kurama redoubled his grip on the detonator switch along with his disappointment. The indecision had probably lasted about five seconds. After a small sigh, he pressed the button. The bombs should have blown up immediately.

But they didn't.

Two times, three times. There was no response.

It was because the wireless signal that should have reached the bombs did not.

Meanwhile, the students continued the evacuation, and not at a normal speed. It was a mad dash like there was no tomorrow. Every one of the students he could see from his binoculars had a look of desperation. This was strange.

“What’s going on!?”

“There’s an extremely powerful electromagnetic disturbance coming from point D.”

The surveillance point up on the roof of an apartment building in the north side was watching for the AS’s approach. That white AS, outrageously, was kneeling there. It had cancelled its ECS, exposing its magnificent figure. Why hadn’t the guards- although, they had probably been overpowered by now- noticed the AS approaching?

No, that could wait. That white AS had suspended its ECS, and was pouring all of its power into creating the electromagnetic disturbance. It shouldn’t be able to hold out for long, though. Probably two minutes at the most.

“Attack immediately,” Kurama ordered his subordinate. “That AS shouldn’t be able to move at all right now.”



One man and one machine to protect 1200 people.

The last operation that Sousuke faced here in Tokyo, more than likely, was going to be the most difficult.

After he left the Arbalest, Sousuke snuck into the enemy’s observation point and quietly subdued the three men there watching for the AS’s approach. He stopped the surveillance

equipment, making a hole in the network, then summoned for the Arbalest to come, on autopilot, to the blind spot. Even though it was unmanned, “AI” was successful in quickly guiding the AS there.

Sousuke left the observation point on the apartment building like that, and just managed to sneak towards the school. The Arbalest waited there, the outpost now under their control.

Sousuke waited until the agreed-upon time, then put his plan into action.

The Arbalest created an electromagnetic disturbance at full power as Sousuke hurried inside the school building. His accomplice in the school- Atsunobu Hayashimizu, had already informed the school to evacuate ahead of time.

The amount of time the Arbalest could keep up the interference at full power was limited.

Only two or three minutes at the most. There was probably no school that could completely evacuate in such a short amount of time.

But this school was different.

Because it was possibly the only school in Japan that could.

That was the one flaw in the attacker’s plan. The fact was that life had become like this for the past ten months without Sousuke’s realization, almost like a joke. It was the kind of panic like in a fairy tale when they say, “The wolf is coming”. But even then, reassuring friends like Hayashimizu had tried to help. Everyone- everyone in the school was desperately evacuating like they were supposed to, scrambling over each other.

Are the things I do that frightening...?

He thought calmly, but nevertheless was thankful for it.

If everyone could manage to take refuge in the schoolyard, then all of the students would be okay even if a bomb went off.

If he left out one person.

In order to save that one person, Sousuke ran as fast as he could.

He didn't have much time.

And even that time was critical.

The electromagnetic interference equipment loaded into the Arbalest and other M9s was the complete opposite of the stealth equipment like the ECS. Crossing broadband and transmitting powerful electromagnetic waves, it jammed things such as enemy radar detection and communications. In other words, it was like something that blared a loud siren from a speaker, drowning out any conversations or footsteps.

But it was rare that Sousuke and the others used this function. Why?

Because it would have clearly given away their position to the enemy. It was like shining a searchlight in the dark. Although they were doing it to interfere with the detonation signal for the bombs hidden in the school, it was almost an act of suicide for the Arbalest.

The emotionless voice of a man resounded throughout the area around Jindai High School.

“Warning. Heavily armed infantry, twelve. Range, one, vectors 3-0-5, 2-2-7, 1-6-4.”

It was the Arbalest reporting over its external speakers on high volume from the roof of apartment building north of the school. Sousuke had already left that building, and was running up the emergency staircase on the backside of the north school building. Right now, because of the broadband electro-magnetic interference, even Sousuke and the Arbalest couldn't use radio communication. Since Al was using technical terminology in English, most of the residents and students wouldn't be able to

understand it, but the enemy was different. Nevertheless, Sousuke needed to know the situation.

The enemy was approaching the Arbalest. They knew that it couldn't move.

I have to hurry...

He was guessing the location where Kyouko was being held. When it came to all sorts of things about the school, Sousuke knew more about it than any other student. Places that no students or personnel came near at this time of day were the water supply compartment on the roof and the basement under the gymnasium. It would be difficult for electromagnetic waves to reach the basement, so that left the water supply.

He had 100 seconds left at most.

Carefully aiming his submachine gun in front of him, he went out onto the roof of the school building. He didn't see any enemies. He ignited a smoke bomb, then cut across the roof in order to minimize the risk of being sniped. The eastern quarter section of space was partitioned off by a fence for the water tank. He finally arrived at the fence. He shattered the cheap padlock on the lattice door with the butt of his gun.

She's here.

Inside the fence, tied to the steel frame support of the storage tank, was Kyouko Tokiwa.

She had her hands cuffed behind her back, a gag in her mouth, and over her clothes- a pound of explosives were tied around her stomach.

Her pale face was exhausted, worn-out by fear. Her pretty eyes stared out from her glasses, red and bloodshot, her tears run dry. When she realized that it was Sousuke who had appeared, she gave cry of desperation.

“Mmu..”



“Wait, Tokiwa.”

He started to come closer, then stopped when he noticed multiple motion laser sensors.

There wasn't time to disable them. He prudently stepped over the lasers stuck at knee-height, and somehow managed to make his way near Kyouko.

“I will definitely rescue you. Don't move.”

He cut the gag with his combat knife, and Kyouko said in a raised voice, “Th-these men I didn't know... they said they knew Kana...”

“They lied,” he answered, then quickly looked at the bomb strapped to Kyouko.

It was just as he thought. It was not a very complex bomb. He could see that the remote detonating circuit was simple, as well as a few traps. If he cut the wire that was fastened to her waist, it would set off the bomb. If he pulled out the bare fuse- no, that would be impossible. The fuse itself had a sensor attached. It would probably take time to find a way to trick it. Dozens of seconds-

Kyouko said in a tearful voice, “I don't know. I don't know what's going on... is, is Kana okay?”

“She's fine. She's in a safe place-”

There was the sharp sound of an explosion coming from the northern apartment building.

The Arbalest was being attacked. That sound was an RPG- portable rockets used by infantry. The Arbalest's composite armor should be able to withstand it to a certain extent, but the enemy didn't just attack once. Two times, three times. The sounds of explosions continued to ring out.

<Currently under attack. ECM functioning. 30 seconds left.>

Al's voice. Sousuke didn't know how much damage the Arbalest had taken, because he couldn't see from his present position. And he still had a job to do. Twenty-five seconds left.

“Sa-Sagara, is that-”

“It’s alright. Shut your eyes.”

It was too late to disable the detonator. Same with the trap. All he could do now was to deceive the radio equipment that received the signal. He took out his tools and tester, then ran his eyes over the bare circuit. He knew the type. He had learned from Spake, who was also a member of the SRT. He recalled the schematics. Connect the cord and bypass the circuit. There was a chance of blowing it up if he did it badly, but there was no time to choose.

Fifteen seconds left.

It didn’t explode. But there was still more to do. He read the circuit condenser number. He remembered the gauge and capacity. Clipping the tester to the terminal, he uniformly regulated the current. The digital meter shook only a little, then stabilized.

Ten seconds left.

In a rerun of a crime drama he had seen before, there was a scene like “Which one should I cut, the red or the blue...” But that wasn’t right. If there was a fifty-fifty chance, no one would be troubled. The gamble that Sousuke was betting on was much more disadvantageous.

There were sixteen leads coming from the circuit.

Fifteen of those were dummies.

Five seconds left.

He had to read into the peculiarities of the person who made this bomb; into the special qualities of the circuit. The bomb maker was probably not on the same level as Sousuke, skill-wise.

There were peculiar characteristics to the dummy circuit. It was something that only an experienced bomb maker could pick up on. What he disliked, what he hated. A type of rationale, as well as

hobbies and preferences. Where would the “dismantle” line left by the manufacturer be?

That's right, what would I do?

Sweat ran down the hand which held the nippers.

Three seconds left.

Which one?

Two seconds.

Which one was it?

One second.

If it had been him, it would be here.

With a conviction that could almost be called ruthless, he cut one of the wires.

The moment lasted forever.

“ECM stopped. This unit will now-”

The sound of an explosion drowned out Al's voice. It was the sound of the Arbalest being bombed. It was not the bomb in front of Sousuke.

He was right. He had made it. Al had held out.

He had been able to disable the wireless detonator. Sousuke took a deep breath, then shook his stiff right hand to try to loosen it up.

“Sagara... Sagara...”

“Don't move yet. I've only tricked the radio equipment. I'm going to undo the traps now.”

That's right, it was still too soon to relax. The moment they saw that no other facilities had blown up, the enemy would realize that the explosions themselves would have no meaning. The students, who had been their other hostages, had already completely evacuated.

There was no communication from the Arbalest, which had been under attack. Had it been destroyed, or possibly withdrawn from the battle area-

“I don’t know... what’s going on,” Kyouko said in an indistinct voice.

Not knowing how to answer her, Sousuke simply said quietly, “I’m sorry,” and quickly went back to work.

“Sagara.”

“Yes?”

“That time our plane was hijacked, Kana said that there was this bad guy who had taken her...”

“He’s dead. He’s not here.”

Recalling Gauron on that passenger plane, Sousuke promptly continued his work on the detonator circuit.

“Then, why? Also...”

Her voice was shaking. Then, as if all of the anxiety she had accumulated so far had broken a dam, Kyouko let out a barrage of questions.

“Then someone really is after Kana, aren’t they? That’s how everyone has gotten mixed up in this, isn’t it? Everyone’s suffering because of it, aren’t they? Then why-”

“Chidori’s not to blame.”

“Then why didn’t she say anything to me about it? I knew. I knew that there seemed to be something really worrying her. No matter how many times I said, ‘Tell me about it’, she never would. And I thought we were best friends. Even then...” Kyouko’s chest heaved up and down.

“*You* know about it. You and she are the only ones that do. Weren’t we all friends?”

“Tokiwa.”

A pain gripped his chest like someone had just cut his heart out with a knife.

“I don’t wanna die without knowing anything. But... what about me? Am I just an outsider to you and Kana? I don’t want to be. I can’t stand it. I’m not that nice of a person.”

“Tokiwa.”

“The same goes for everyone else. Wasn’t it dangerous? Why didn’t you say anything? What’s been going on? Ever since you came, something strange has been going on. I don’t know what.”

“That’s-”

“Who are you?”

“...”

“What- what in the world are you?”

Kyouko was always very sweet, but now there was a bitter edge to her words. Yet there wasn’t any spite in her tone or on her face. She was simply complaining. She desperately squeezed the tears out. For someone confronted with a phenomenon and entity so completely foreign that they couldn’t understand it, it was an honest reaction because of too much innocence. It was the cruellest response.

What are you?

“I...”

Sousuke faltered as his hand stopped putting a clip on the detonator circuit.

“I...”

“He’s a killer,” said a man’s voice from behind him.

“...!?”

Kyouko gulped.

Sousuke wanted to stop and grab his submachine gun, but he couldn't because of the dismantling work he was doing right now. If he let go, the detonator circuit would activate.

He slowly turned his head.

Three enemies had approached easily next to the water supply tank. They were pointing guns at them. They had probably waited until a time when he couldn't take his hands away.

The man in the center seemed to be the leader. He was large, had short hair, and his face was unshaven. He was wearing a black trench coat, and his long, graceful fingers were impressive.

He had a reserved demeanor that, while it was generous, understood his own power well. This quiet and philosophical appearance was characteristic of a sniper or a hunter.

Of course...

When he thought about everything in his flight since last night, Sousuke understood. The one directing the enemy pursuit was this man. Even to Sousuke, he was no ordinary soldier. He had relentlessly cornered Sousuke, trapped him in his net, and shaken him up. So far, Sousuke had probably only been able to outwit him because of his familiarity with the area.

The man said, "You've done well so far all by yourself."

"That's not true. You idiots have been lining up for me," Sousuke said impudently, continuing his dismantling work.

"That spiteful mouth of yours is quite something, Sousuke Sagara- no, weren't you called Kashim?"

"It seems you know a lot about me."

"A little."

"You worked with Gauron, didn't you- Kurama?" Sousuke muttered, and one of the man's eyebrows turned up in surprise.

"Well, this is an honor. You know me."

"From my time in Lebanon. I came across your picture."

“It’s a small business. You understand. Everything over there was overdone. That’s why I had a change of occupation, same as you.”

“A mercenary like you, who killed five members of the SAS (Britain’s Special Air Service), took a high school student who didn’t know a thing hostage?”

“You’re not telling me ‘You’re a coward’, are you?”

When Kurama noticed the trembling figure of Kyouko, who didn’t understand any of the conversation, he snorted.

“...Miss. I’ll tell you in his place. This man is an active professional killer. He belongs to a certain mercenary unit, and is an expert in various weapons and tactics. The story that he is some kind of high school student is a lie. He infiltrated this school with forged documents.”

“Wh-what are you saying...”

“He can kill as easily as he can breathe, if he wants to. We are of the same make. Just earlier he very neatly killed three of my subordinates without making a sound. Very skillful.”

“Saga...ra?”

Kyouko’s wavering eyes stared at Sousuke’s stomach, his cheeks, and the back of his hands.

His shirt and skin was caked in half-dried blood- her eyes were rooted to the dark red stains which substantiated Kurama’s eloquent speech.

“But, well- Mithril is probably getting annihilated as we speak.”

“What?”

“Your base is falling. I sympathize, but... I think the policy is to take no prisoners. So no matter how far you run, no reinforcements will come. The same goes for that white AS on the run, because our ASes will be arriving soon.”

“...”

“You did well, but this is it. Give up. If you obediently hand over Kaname Chidori, I will guarantee this girl’s safety.”

Kyouko gasped.

“Hand over? Kaname? What do you mean?”

There was no longer any chance to retaliate. Before he could take his hands from the circuit that he had finally finished work on, he would probably be shot squarely in the head right in front of Kyouko.

Therefore-

Someone had come up on the roof. There was the *tap tap* sound of someone walking unsteadily in heels, as well as labored breathing.

“Tokiwa!? Where are you? Everyone’s evacuated! If you’re here, please answer!”

It was a woman’s voice.

He could see the woman on the other side of the fence. She was in her mid-twenties, slender, with a bob cut, and wearing a suit. Her shoulders were heaving up and down like she had been running around inside the school.

“Restrain her,” Kurama ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

One of his subordinates turned step, then ran to the other side of the fence.

“What, what is this, you’re...!? Th-this place is restricted to people affiliated with the school... yaaah!” the woman screamed. She tried to run, but without being able to do much at all, she was caught.

“Ow, let go...”

Grabbing the woman by the wrist, the man led her beside the water supply tank where Sousuke and the others were. Her face was pale, and her lips were trembling with terror.

“To-Tokiwa...? And Sagara? What is this? Who are these people? Why are you handcuffed...?”

“It seems to be one of the teachers here,” Kurama’s subordinate said.

“Perfect. Make her kneel.”

“Ah...!”

The man violently pushed down on her shoulders, and the woman fell to her knees.

Kurama’s subordinate then pressed his gun to the back of the woman’s head, who was offering no resistance at all.

“St-stop it...”

“There’s no need to pointlessly tell me where Kaname Chidori is. First, I’m going to show you that I’m serious. It’s a shame for the teacher, though.”

“A-are you okay, Tokiwa? As your homeroom teacher, I will definitely try to persuade them, okay? There’s no need to be afraid, okay?”

Kyouko was frightened, of course, but more than that, in her utterly confused state, she was staring at the face of the female teacher.

Then- she said, “Who are you?”

“What-”

And around the same time the woman moved.

The woman’s movements were as fast as lightning.

She knocked away the gun behind her head while at the same time wrenching the man’s wrist up, bent over and threw him. Before he could even hit the ground, she had pulled a small gun hidden under her skirt and pressed the muzzle against his head.

She fired. He was dead in an instant.

Sousuke had also moved at the same time. Until the moment he would somehow be able to take his hand away, he flung the finished detonator circuit and pulled out his knife.

There was a glint as the knife flew towards Kurama. Kurama quickly brought his left arm up to protect his neck, and the knife plunged into his arm.

“...”

The other man tried to shoot the woman, but wasn't fast enough. Using the man she had just killed as a shield, she fired again. Sousuke also pulled the gun from his waist and filled him full of bullets. The man took a shot to the head and toppled over.

Kurama retreated, using his left arm with the knife sticking out of it to protect his head, while firing the submachine gun in his right. Sousuke and the woman crouched down as the bullets hit the water supply tank, ricocheting and causing sparks to fly. They both fired. Kurama was hit by a number of bullets, but only staggered slightly.

They fired again, hitting him with their entire cartridges. He must have been wearing a bulletproof vest, because he didn't take any critical damage. With movements that seemed unimaginable from such a physique, Kurama ran towards the fence.

If I can catch him and make him talk...

He changed out his cartridge as he started to go after him, but the woman stopped him.

“Wait, Sergeant,” she said in a cool voice completely different from the frightened act she put on earlier. “You can't catch him now. Besides, there's the matter of the bomb here.”

“Uh...”

“Am I wrong?”

She tossed off the bob cut wig, staring straight at him. Sousuke looked at her again. From a distance, she had looked like Sousuke and the others' homeroom teacher, Eri Kagurazaka, but she wasn't.



The whites of her slanted, emotionless eyes were clearly visible above her thin jaw ^{*3}; and her small, white, waxy face reminded him of a Japanese doll.

“...is that your real face?”

“Unfortunately.”

“You’re a woman...”

“Don’t you have anything else to say?” the woman- the agent from Mithril’s Intelligence Department, “Wraith”, said sourly. “If it wasn’t me, who would willingly do something like show their true identity to you?”

Sousuke kneeled down next to the mostly dazed Kyouko and set about dismantling the last of the bomb.

“What were you doing until now?”

“I was looking for you guys. Last night, when you guys were coming home from school, I moved to the observation point near ‘Angel’s’ residence, same as usual.”

“...will you secure that infrastructure there? Is there a light? Shine it in there.”

“Jesus...”

“You have my thanks.”

“You don’t mean it.”

“I’m not lying... then what happened?”

“Then they got me again. That blonde guy and his robots snuck up behind me without me noticing. Why he didn’t kill me, I don’t know. It was two in the morning when I blacked out, and I’ve been like that ever since. Then I followed you.”

He disabled the fuse sensor, and after stabilizing the circuit, he slowly eased the electric fuse from the plastic explosives.

“Is that it?”

“No...”

He cut the lead wrapped around Kyouko’s body. The needle of the tester jumped as the detonator circuit activated. But nothing happened because the fuse had already been removed.

“That’s it.”

“Good grief...”

She probably wasn’t used to this kind of bomb handling. Wraith took a deep breath and wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“...so what do you plan to do now, Sergeant?”

“You want to know where she is?” he said, intending to be sarcastic, and a fleeting shadow passed over Wraith’s expressionless face. It wasn’t anger or irritation. What had crossed was a kind of sorrow.

“...?”

Averting her eyes from Sousuke’s scowling face, Wraith looked beyond the steel frame and fence.

“That man gave way, but the perimeter isn’t broken yet. Once they get reorganized, they’ll be back. The students will probably be safe like that, but we’re still in danger.”

“I know.”

“I’m saying that it’ll be difficult to escape.”

“That’s not true.”

This woman from the intelligence department didn’t know about the Arbalest’s autonomous maneuvering function. If Al were still alive-

“Al, can you hear me?” Sousuke called out over his wireless radio.

<Affirmative, Sergeant>

“Damage report.”

<Class B damage to right thigh and lower right arm. Class C damage to left shoulder and left hip. ACD functioning. Battle maneuver maintenance prioritized. AML has been suspended>

“What’s your position?”

<Nearby. Approximately 800 meters north of the school. Three enemy ASes equipped with ECS are approaching>

“Can you shake them and come here?”

<I will try>

Sousuke could see it from the roof. There was the sound of an explosion from the urban district to the north, then white smoke

rising in the sky. From the schoolyard to the south came the voices of confused students.

The city that they lived in was in chaos.

They didn't want to see this kind of city.

“You’re gonna fight to the very end, Sergeant?”

“Yes,” Sousuke said, helping Kyouko up. “First, I’m going to take care of the enemy and escape. Then I will go to where Chidori is and we’ll run away. To somewhere... somewhere.”

“What if she says ‘No’?”

“She won’t.”

“Is there any basis for that other than your own beliefs?”

Sousuke clenched his fists.

“What do you know about it? I’m not thinking of anything other than protecting her.”

“You...”

“I will protect her at all costs... I will.”

The Arbalest approached. It was trailing white smoke as it jumped from roof to roof, building to building.

“I will carry you and Tokiwa to a safe place in the Arbalest. You can do what you like after that.”

“But-”

“I’m not handing Chidori over. Give up.”

“...”

Kyouko looked like she wanted to ask him something, but Sousuke placed his hands on her shoulders and said as gently as possible, “I’m sorry I’ve given you scary memories, Tokiwa.”

“Sagara...”

“I’m... just like that guy said. I probably won’t be able to come to school anymore. This is goodbye.”

“Eh, but, that’s-”

Sousuke handed the now confused Kyouko a key. It was the key to Kaname's apartment.

“When things have settled down, please go to her place and take care of her hamster. Chidori's worried about it.”

“Ah...”

A strong gust of wind blew across the roof, and there was the high-pitched sound of a running engine. The concrete shattered as the Arbalest landed on the north school building.

It was damaged all over. Its white armor was dirty, and he could tell where it had been hit.

The fact that it was okay despite being hit by numerous plastic explosives was thanks to its new composite armor.

“The enemy is approaching. Please hurry.”

The Arbalest opened its hatch as soon as it kneeled down. Sousuke started to run towards the AS, stopped after one step, and yelled at Kyouko.

“Tokiwa.”

“Huh?”

“It was fun. Thanks.”

There wasn't time to wait for a reply. Almost jumping into it, Sousuke slipped down into the Arbalest's cockpit.

“Close hatch. Mode 4. Maximum power.”

<Roger>

He soon prepared the cockpit's master suit, running the generator at maximum output. The ECCS (anti-ECS sensor) responded. Three enemy ASes were approaching. North-northwest.

Range, 300 meters.

The Arbalest rushed to the water supply section and picked up Kyouko and Wraith.

Sousuke heard Kyouko's scream on the external audio.

<Disturbance detected. 2, 1...>

“...!”

He jumped. The shots fired by the enemy machines in front of and behind him made large holes in the concrete of the roof and the storage tank. The firepower of those shells was completely incomparable to a human-sized weapon. Pieces of concrete and steel flew everywhere, and sharp fragments struck the Arbalest's armor. The Arbalest transected the road in front of the main entrance, landing in the parking lot of a small factory. He set the two of them down behind a truck.

That's when he noticed.

Kyouko sunk to the ground. At first glance he could see she was bleeding from the head and arm, and something red was gradually soaking through her white uniform on her side. She had been hit by the shrapnel when he had evaded the attack.

“Wha...”

Just like a new recruit who has just noticed that his arms and legs have been blown off in an explosion, Sousuke was stunned for a moment, unable to speak.

It happened.

It finally happened.

Why this girl? Why did it happen to her? What should I do?

Someone was yelling.

“geant! ...Sergeant!!”

It was Wraith. Although she was also injured in various places, she laid Kyouko on the ground and quickly took off her blood-soaked clothes.

“I'll take care of her! You have to hurry!”

“Ah...”

“What are you doing!?”

He didn't need any more time to recover from the shock. He could think later. His soldier's instincts returned immediately.

He turned around. The enemy ASes had come.

<The enemy has spread out. Designating Mike 2 as prime target>

“Mike 1.”

<Roger>

The Arbalest broke out into a run.

Crossing the lead colored sky with quick movements, the three enemy ASes were trying to surround the Arbalest.

They cancelled their ECS.

Grey urban camouflage. Massive rounded silhouettes.

Sousuke realized then. They were Venom types- what the other side called “Codarl” types.

You bastards...

He couldn’t use his shot cannon; he didn’t want to destroy anymore of the city.

Manipulating the controller with his right hand, Sousuke pulled out the monomolecular cutter from the Arbalest’s weapon rack.

Translator’s Notes:

1. Castero is higher in rank than Mao- he is a full lieutenant, she is a second or junior lieutenant.
2. Avenger is a 30mm gatling gun.
3. In Japanese, people with "sanpaku" eyes, or eyes that show the whites of the eyes on three sides, are considered chronically fatigued, accident prone, or headed for a tragic outcome.

Chapter 5: When the Crossbow Breaks

Why couldn't things ever go smoothly..?

Kurama, who had somehow managed to escape from the roof, didn't curse, but searched his coat pockets for his cigarettes instead. They weren't there. That's right, he had quit.

Now out of options, he cursed quietly to himself.

He had left the school quickly and made it to a convenience store near the shopping district.

The streets were silent due to all the chaos.

There was a loud explosion in the direction of the school, but it wasn't the bombs he had set.

He also heard the faint sound of an AS's propulsion system. Kurama gave brief instructions to his subordinate over the radio.

“What about the AS reinforcements?”

“They're here and in pursuit of the enemy AS, but-”

There came the sound of multiple shots being fired. Two ASes were battling nearby. A black shadow cut through the sky, and a building was smashed in various places.

“What? What's happening?”

“The enemy AS is turning back towards the school. It seems that our guy is trying to cut that Sagara guy off.”

“Destroy him before that.”

“No, wait, he's not. It seems he didn't make it in time. Now the enemy looks like he's going to counterattack. The squad leader is-”

There was yet another loud explosion right over head. The Codarl M and the enemy's white AS had collided in mid-air 50 meters above, and were starting to fall, almost intertwined.

“Whoa...”

Kurama quickly threw himself on the ground. Utility poles were snapped, guardrails were flattened, and a magazine shop was half-crushed when the two ASes hit the ground. Shards of glass and concrete went flying and a cloud of dust covered the area.

He could see that they were both a tangled mess, but the winner was clear. The white AS's monomolecular cutter was sticking out of the Codarl M's chest, and the Codarl M had also been crushed from the fall.

The monomolecular cutter made a high-pitched squeal as it was extracted from the Codarl.

Then, in order to meet the remaining Codarl Ms, the white AS quickly got up and jumped in the southwest direction.

A blast of wind blew Kurama's coat around him.

“Damn it.”

“It seems that the squad leader's machine has been destroyed.”

“Yes. It was right in front of me.”

Now in a sitting position, Kurama picked up a pack of cigarettes that had fallen along with other debris next to him.

“We should leave the AS to ASes. Have you found the girl?”

“Not yet. There's just some evidence on the roof of shopping center 21-31. There is brand new concrete damage. Probably due to an AS landing.”

“So, what of it? The enemy moves, doesn't he?”

“I heard from a salesperson who said that that roof is also a parking lot, but right after it opened, there was a woman putting an unconscious girl into a car.”

“...what about descriptions of that woman and car?”

“He couldn't say anything other than that the woman was young. The car was a white Alfard.”

“Stretch the network out to police headquarters. Get the police camera records for the past three hours.”

“Roger.”

He cut the transmission, unconsciously opening the seal on the cigarettes as he thought suspiciously about it.

What was going on? Did that mean she was going to hand her over? Was that woman from before the one taking away the objective? But if so, then why had she not been aiding them so far?

No, more than that, why had she expressly shown up there?

He received a transmission on a different line. It was from Leonard Testarossa.

“What do you want?”

“It seems to be a close fight.”

Kurama took a cigarette out of the unsealed box. “Thanks to you, it is. Lots of things have gone wrong,” he said, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. It didn’t matter, it was just in his mouth.

It wasn’t as if he had started smoking again.

“We still don’t know where the girl is. It’s pretty much over.”

“No, it’s not.”

“What do you mean?”

“The girl is probably not far. And who do you think would make the most valuable hostage for her?”

“Huh? No...”

“He would. Him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Right now he’s-”

There was the sound of an explosion in the distance. Kurama’s subordinate reported “The second ally unit has been destroyed” over the other radio.

“-on a rampage.”

“Is that so? Three minutes will do. Could you go ahead and tell him to hold out until then?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Three minutes. That will be enough.”

Leonard’s communication cut off there. Kurama clicked his tongue and looked for a lighter to light his cigarette. There wasn’t one. Not in his pocket, or in the trash around him.

“Damn it.”

In the end, he took the cigarette out of his mouth and slung it away.



Inside the dimly lit transport hangar, he checked the condition of the thin globe.

It gripped his right hand, then opened.

Not bad.

He could hear the Captain’s report over the receiver in his ear. Now over Tokyo. Altitude, 5,000 meters. Estimated arrival time, around three minutes.

“Good work. I’ll be boarding from here.”

“Do you need to go?” a woman’s calm voice said on another line in the receiver. She was right in front of him, but the roar of the plane drowned out her voice.

“For a change. I have to go and get my exercise,” he said, looking down self-derisively at his own figure in a pilot’s suit. “Plus it seems that they have misunderstood me.”

“Is that so? Then take care.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.”



Reversing his steps, he walked out towards the machine crouched down inside the darkened hangar. The machine vibrated, and the dimly shining sensor on the head shook slightly.



When the damaged Arbalest went to battle the enemy ASES, Wraith began to treat Kyouko's injuries.

There were bruises and cuts on the right side of her face. They weren't bleeding from what she could see.

She was more worried about the blood coming from her right side.

Wraith cut Kyouko's clothes with an army knife and looked at the injury. It was probably about the size of the end of her pinky finger- a piece of shrapnel was embedded in her diaphragm under the ribs. It was a lodged-shrapnel wound. She couldn't tell how much damage the internal organs had received. She would have no choice but to perform first-aid, then quickly carry her to a hospital.

She couldn't rely on an ambulance in this kind of mess. Wraith picked up the limp girl and hurried to the parking lot two blocks away.

This is ridiculous.

Why in the world was she doing this? She could leave this girl and run to the car. It would be enough to say to the girl waiting inside, "I rescued her like I promised, now come with me". But Wraith didn't do that. So that this girl wouldn't die, she was carefully supporting her as she ran to a white van parked in the lot. She released the lock and opened the automatic door to the back seat.

"Kyouko...?"

Kaname Chidori, who had been lying down inside, looked at Kyouko's figure and dizzily got up.



Right, left. Up, down.

The enemy AS ran all over the midday Sengawa streets in his shaking target box.

The cherry trees he was accustomed to were in pieces.

The doughnut shop that everyone went to all the time had collapsed.

The small truck from the bread shop that came and went to the school had been blown up.

Everything was being instantly destroyed- all of the scenery that had gratified him, been almost like a friend to him.

<Proximity alert!>

An alarm sounded. The enemy was approaching, pointing its rifle straight at him.

It fired.

The Arbalest thrust out its left hand, and the atmosphere shimmered. The entire bullet scattered. The enemy closed in on him from on high. Sousuke crouched down as it passed, catching his enemy's foot. He then flipped it into a row of trees and telephone poles.

He had no intention of giving the enemy time to recover. He quickly turned aside and threw his anti-tank dagger. It received an explosion of plastic explosives in the side, and the third enemy AS moved no more.

The streets grew quiet.

He stood on the road that ran in front of Jindai High School, using his active sensors to search for any remaining enemies. He

received no response. Most of the students had already evacuated to the residential areas, but a few remained in the schoolyard, staring up dumbfounded at the figure of the Arbalest.

He could see several of his classmates.

Shinji Kazama was there. And so was Koutarou Onodera.

On closer inspection of the damage, he found that the ECS unit had been nearly half destroyed.

It would be difficult to become invisible and move around the city as he pleased.

What will I do...?

He would remove himself by force, collect Kaname and escape to the suburbs at full speed then-

Alarms went off.

<Large transport plane approaching. Direction, 187. Range 20. One plane. Speed, 500. Slowing down from 1000.>

He couldn't turn the head. His field of vision was dimming, probably because of fatigue and blood loss.

Sousuke shook his head and blinked his eyes. On the screen, a transport plane was coming from the southern sky. The target box said it was a "low-level threat". It was a model C-17.

Whether it was enemy or ally was "unknown".

The transport was coming closer.

It was going fairly fast, and slowing down. Probably already 300 meters or thereabouts.

The roar of the turbo fan engines shook the surrounding rubble. He was not going to shoot it down by any means- this was a town area. As Sousuke put himself on his guard, the transport plane passed.

In that moment, the transport plane as well as something else cast a shadow overhead.

His eyes caught up with it. The parachute that it cut off fluttered in the sky over the north school building, but he couldn't see anything else. The lone transport plane ascended, and continued off towards the west.

“...?”

Something had fallen from that plane. That's all that Sousuke knew.

But, what was it..?

<Six o'clock, Range Zero!>

An AS was standing right behind him.

Sousuke moved at the same time the “enemy” AS's right arm moved as quick as lightning, slicing the Arbalest's shoulder armor. Faster than the equipment could drop to the ground, the Arbalest defended, pulling the shot cannon from its waist and firing. The “enemy figure” quickly wavered, and the shots cut uselessly through the air, disappearing into the distance.

“Uh...”

He jumped back to gain some distance, but the enemy was still there.

Quietly. So quietly it was almost suffocating.

It had dark silver armor, and a sharp form.

It seemed to be from the same family as the Codarls he had fought many times before, but it was a machine he had never seen. Its slender extremities gave the impression of delicateness about them, but it was definitely not weak. There was something coming from the shoulders- large components like wings or a cape that gave this machine a certain gravity and magnificence.

That was it.

This AS was more like the polished silver figure of a god than a weapon. It was a much stronger, more beautiful, and more overpowering entity than the beat-up Arbalest.



<There are no models applicable to this data.>

“Try to estimate the specs.”

<It has greater output, maneuverability, and stealth than the Codarl type. More than likely, it is equipped with a Lambda Driver. It is impossible to estimate further.>

“Are we of the same opinion, then?”

<Affirmative. It is dangerous. I recommend immediate withdrawal.>

“Do you think we can?”

<Negative.>

“Then we’re of the same opinion.”

The enemy was empty-handed. It wasn’t holding one rifle or firearm.

The AS, as if it couldn’t see Sousuke at all, turned its head to the people in the schoolyard and slowly put its right hand on its hip.

“Well then- Sousuke Sagara,” the voice rang out over the enemy’s external speakers. It was the cool voice of a young man that he knew. “-I have no intention of taking these people hostage. I don’t even see the point of it. But, I will go ahead and say this. This is your final warning. You don’t intend on giving up and handing the girl over, do you?”

“You already know the answer,” Sousuke said over his external speakers, even though he knew that his classmates still in the schoolyard could hear his voice.

“Well, I thought so,” Leonard said. “But you know, that kind of impudence... do you think it’s cool?”

“What are you talking about?”

“A little, huh? Because I hate that kind of thing.”

Sousuke was hit by a hush, and the enemy opened the “wings” on its shoulders.

Its toes lifted up, as if there were no gravity. The atmosphere around it shimmered and clouds of dust swirled around as the AS danced easily in the air.

It wasn't jumping by kicking off the ground.

It was simply floating.

The eyes set in the asymmetrically-cornered head lorded over Sousuke. The attack that continued after that was as fierce as a muddy river.



Kaname could do nothing but cry and watch as Wraith took out the medical kit inside the car to perform first aid on Kyouko's injuries.

“Wi... will you save her?”

“I can.”

“Is she okay?!”

“She's just as you see.”

Wraith worked silently, her hands stained red with fresh blood.

“Kyouko... I'm sorry, Kyouko...”

It's my fault.

Everything is my fault. Everything. Because I took so long. Because I couldn't decide.

My best friend. My symbol of happiness.

It's all my fault.

Someone, please help. God. Don't let my friend die. Please. I'll do whatever, just somehow. Somehow-

Just then, she heard another call.

It was the voice of the young man who was trying to kill the other important person in her life.



So, it seemed that the white AS wasn't a bad machine after all.

Compared to its M9 base, its maneuverability and power were fair enough. Even with all the damage it had received, its operational ability was truly admirable. And its toughness was beyond the level of an experimental machine. It probably hypothesized and designed perfect combat scenarios.

“But, you see...”

His “Belial” spun in mid-air, stopped, zigzagged, and flew towards the enemy's back. Right now his thoughts were concentrated on his intentions and all of the laws of physics.

He hadn't yet used any of the weapons fixed on his back.

A strike from his hand was enough.

Sousuke's machine turned around, and he cut off its left arm below the shoulder. Even though the damaged AS lost its balance, it pointed the shot cannon at him.

It fired.

Leonard stopped the shot without difficulty, throwing it back on his opponent. It hit. Metal fragments went flying, and the enemy's right knee bent back in the opposite direction.

There was no way he could win.

Against someone like himself. Someone who could freely use the “Omni Sphere” and bring out all of the Lambda Driver's power, like himself.

You can see, can't you?

“Stop it”

You understand now, right?

“Don't kill him”

I'm annoyed

"I'm begging you"

Only you can stop it

"You can love me"

Turn that courage into strength

"I'll help you"

Why for this man...!

"I'll forget him"

Sousuke Sagara still hadn't gone down.

He was preventing himself from falling over with just one arm and one leg, taking refuge in the school's courtyard and firing his shot cannon. Leonard easily dodged the bullets, approached with a dim fury, and blew away the cannon.

There was an explosion right behind him.

A delayed fuse and a claymore landmine. A trap like this, at a time like this. What obstinacy. What strength. And still the white AS was firing its head-mounted machine gun as it tried to take out its last anti-tank dagger with its right hand.

"How pathetic."

The Belial opened the weapon bay in its left arm, firing the 40mm gun inside. The bullets tore the enemy's right arm, right leg, and head all to pieces. The power of the enemy's Lambda Driver was insignificant.

He stomped on the abdomen of the enemy AS, which had now lost both arms, its head, and all of its weapons, and forcibly tore the armor off the chest. In the middle of a warped, cracked screen with sparks flying everywhere, he could see the figure of the pilot.

There wasn't the panic that he had been expecting anywhere. Sousuke Sagara let go of the controller and pointed an automatic pistol at him. From across the cracked screen. His face

was covered in blood, but the look in his eyes said he wouldn't succumb to anything in this world.

“...”

He fired the pistol.

He was aiming at Leonard's sensor. From the level of an AS battle, this really was a very weak attack. All it did was create unpleasant scratches on the sensor area.

He could hear the voice of the enemy's AI.

<Generator... stopped. All condensers broken. Recommend abandoning unit and.... es... cape....>

Silence.

Missing both arms, the right leg, its head, and even its central area destroyed, the ARX-7 was a complete wreck. A gentle breeze blew through the school courtyard, in which there was one giant who had lost its life, and another giant, which was stepping on the body.

“Good work, Al,” the pilot said, the muzzle of his gun shaking. “Your discharge... is granted.”

Sousuke Sagara shot again.

It made two more unsightly marks.

Leonard felt like there was a mosquito buzzing around his ear. It was probably the first time he ever felt that kind of discomfort.

I don't care anymore. I'll crush him- he thought. He knew that it wasn't connected at all to wanting to make this man yield to him. He knew that from experience.

But that was okay.

If you're going to refuse to the very end-

“Stop it already...”

He saw a girl in the corner of his screen. She was standing in front of the shrubbery, her shoulders heaving, looking up at his AS.

It was Kaname Chidori.

“Put an end to it. I’ll go.”

“With whom, I wonder?”

The girl’s black hair blew in the gentle breeze.

There was a long silence. No, she had already clearly stated her answer.

“With you.”

Leonard turned his AS to face Sousuke Sagara and said, “Did you hear that, Sousuke Sagara?”

His Belial left the wreckage of the Arbalest and reverently kneeled down in front of her, sticking out its right hand. Looking downcast, she slowly sat down in its palm.

The Belial stood up, looking down at the loser.

“Chidori... stop it...” Sousuke Sagara mumbled.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.”

“I’m alright. And so are you...”

“I will... bring you back...”

His arm, sapped of its strength, hit the warped frame.

“Bring you back... to this place...”

The Belial’s tactile sensors didn’t pick it up, but Leonard knew that she was shaking. She was desperately choking back her sobs.

“Let’s go...” the girl in the hand of the AS said over the screen. Leonard shrugged, and quietly maneuvered his machine away.

The moment that he turned his back, Kaname Chidori said something to Sousuke Sagara.

Since he only caught the movement of her lips, he couldn't tell what it was she had said.



She could hear ambulance sirens.

Also fire engines and police cars. Wraith was driving to a nearby emergency clinic when something flying from the direction of the school passed overhead.

It was a dark-silver AS. There was absolutely no sound of rotors or jets.

Was that... an arm slave?

The machine activated its ECS, and disappeared into the ashen sky.

She only saw that the unit was carrying someone in its arms for a moment, but even so, Wraith knew who that person was.

After all, it had been Wraith herself that didn't stop Kaname Chidori from leaving the car.

Her decision had been in direct violation of the intelligence department's intentions. General Amit would probably never forgive her.

Damn it...

After checking this girl in the back seat into the hospital, she would have no choice but to go into hiding. Somewhere far away. Somewhere where no one knew her. This would be the second time she had worked for an organization, originally coming from the intelligence department in North Korea. In fact, she might not go back into this business.

She would go with her feelings, and forget her mission.

It might just be as that girl said. She might be more suited to be a kind of unknown actor.



The battle with the enemy landing forces on Merida Island was still continuing within the underground base. The surface battle was already pretty much over.

Most of the base's personnel had taken up guns and, under temporary organization, met the enemy. The air conditioner was blown up, as well as a number of other facilities. It was far better than handing it over to the enemy.

The sounds of gunshots and explosions had reached the Command Center in the middle of the base. There was yelling and screaming, too.

The Command Center would fall very shortly.

Tessa had finally been forced to order evacuation of the Command Center. The remaining personnel took up arms and hurried to the uninjured submarine's dock, led by Corporal Yang of the SRT. Lieutenant Commander Kalinin took up the rear.

They didn't know the condition of the dock, since the communications network within the base had been cut to pieces and it was difficult for each station to communicate with each other.

They couldn't even announce the order to evacuate to the dock, and they didn't know how long it would take to reach most of the base personnel, who were still fighting.

When they took the supposedly still-safe number 3 passage down to the dock, they were attacked from an unexpected direction. The communications ensign took a bullet and fell. He didn't even scream.

Protect the Captain.

Someone yelled this. Some became a shield, other returned fire, and one by one, her subordinates fell.

Bullets were flying all over the corridor, and the fierce reverberations of exploding hand grenades echoed through the dim passageway.

Lieutenant Commander Kalinin yelled “Never mind it, just go” to someone as he fired his submachine gun. Corporal Yang returned through the smoke and pulled Tessa’s hand with a “This way”.

Stumbling, choking, and dragging her feet, she continued to run down the corridor. Kalinin wasn’t there. Neither were several of her other subordinates. From well behind them, she could clearly hear the sounds of intermittent gunshots. He had stayed behind to fight.

Now the only one with her was Yang.

“The Lieutenant Commander-”

“It’s no good. Hurry.”

But the enemy was sly, as if they knew the layout of the base really well. Four enemy soldiers carrying carbines jumped out at them from a corner of their path.

“!”

The enemy had been anticipating them. The submarine dock was only a little further.

Even so, Yang shot first. The first guy took a bullet to the head, falling back and hitting the floor like a spring. But the other soldiers, unperturbed, fired their submachine guns at Yang. The bullets hit him square in the chest, and Yang threw his head back.

“Captain-”

Yang steadied himself, and shot again. A second enemy fell in front of them.

“Run-”

It was no good. He took a number of other shots, and collapsed helplessly to the floor.

Tessa could do nothing but support his back.

No, there was still something.

She took the carbine from his hand, and, surprised at its weight, aimed the muzzle of it straight in front of her. But the remaining enemies easily closed in on her and kicked the carbine away to the side.

“...!”

In a voice of stifled hatred, the one of them said, “This brat’s the leader?”

“Seems so. Let’s give her some trouble.”

“She’s ours. Strip her.”

“Good idea. Shall we?”

“There won’t be a problem afterwards if we do. We’ve got time.”

Just then, there was another voice from the side.

“Time? You’re out of it.”

And aiming at the men as they responded, Melissa Mao fired her submachine gun on full auto. There was dancing gunpowder smoke and ammunition, and the two enemy soldiers collapsed in a spray of blood.

“Melissa.”

Her pilot’s suit was dirty all over, she was breathing loudly as she approached. “Let’s go,” she said shortly.

“Yang is-”

“He’s fine. He’s wearing body armor, although it looks like he took a couple in the leg and stomach- for better or for worse, the SRT are without a doubt the best, aren’t they, Yang?”

“Ow... hah hah...” Yang said in a pain-wracked voice as the two of them helped him up.

“But... it seems like... all the good lines... are taken.”

“Idiot. Can you walk?”

“Yeah. I’m fine... uh!”

Supporting Yang under both arms as he dripped blood, Tessa and Melissa hurried towards the submarine dock.

“What’s the situation?” Mao asked through broken breaths. She was also extremely exhausted.

“This base is falling. The personnel are evacuating. We were attacked even here, and the five last remaining people from the command center and I...”

Tessa swallowed.

“Then Mr. Kalinin stayed behind. He’s... gone, isn’t he?”

“...yes.”

“We also lost Mr. Castero.”

Mao’s jaw tightened.

“We haven’t heard from Mr. Clouseau or Mr. Weber. When you consider the situation above ground...”

“...there’s nothing that can be done. This sort of thing happens when you fight a losing battle,” Mao said, but in a thin, shaking voice. “Damn it. I’ll... I’ll make them pay for this.”

“That was my plan, also.”

“Hah hah,” for the first time, Mao laughed without letting out a small sigh.

“So I have to come. I love you, Tessa.”

“I love you, too.”

Yang was getting vague, muttering “Umm, I’m...” almost deliriously.

Their legs felt heavy, they were panting and their bodies hurt all over as they slowly came closer to the dock entrance.

“Almost there.”

“Yeah.”



Someone was yelling on the other side of the barricade to the door. Rifle in hand, he beckoned Tessa and Mao to hurry. They were helped by several members of the PRT, and when they entered the submarine dock, the several hundred people gathered there from the base personnel as well as the crew were waiting on her.

“Attention!!”

And- unbelievably- even in this situation, they were all lined up in perfect order. Three lines of people stretched into the distance in front of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, which was waiting to depart now that the flooding of the dock had finished.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Miss Captain,” said her second-in-command, Commander Richard Mardukas, who was standing at the very end of the first line. “The strongest submarine in human history to ever dominate the seven seas, the *Tuatha de Danaan*, is ready to sail when you are. Your orders, please!”

He had probably been helping with the fitting-out work until the very last moment. He was covered in oil and soot, but still possessed an unwavering dignity and pride.

“...really. I’m amazed,” Tessa said as she handed the unconscious Yang over to an orderly.

“Keeping discipline at a time like this?”

“Yes, ma’am. Discipline is even more important at a time like this.”

Mardukas wasn’t grinning at all. It was an answer that almost wasn’t like him.

They could still hear the gun battle in the distance, and the surviving Behemoth was waiting for them where the dock came out on the exterior of the island.

Even so, she said in a resonant voice, “All hands, take your stations!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” everyone replied at the same time.

The ship’s generator was satisfactory. Using disposable M6s, they fired at the enemies, who were only waiting on the rear garrison after they had infiltrated the submarine dock, and the very last person jumped on the boat. At that moment-

Tessa gave the order from her Captain’s chair on the bridge.

“Ahead one-third!”

“Aye, ma’am. Ahead one-third!”

The submarine slowly began to move. They headed towards the great deep waiting outside the underground base. When the rushing enemies tried to shoot a rocket at the boat, the explosives hidden in the dock ceiling blew up. Countless pieces of steel frame and rocks poured down on top of the enemy soldiers, raising a cloud of dust.

“Go ahead and open hatch number 4.”

“Hatch 4? Why?” Mardukas gave a puzzled look at her order to open the large AS hatch on the top of the deck- the same one the Arbalest entered during the time in Shun On.

“If they are still alive, they will definitely come.”

“I see. Open hatch number 4!” Mardukas ordered without any further hesitation.

The *Tuatha de Danaan* continued on through the enormous water passageway that was supported by steel frames.

They sped up. And sped up. And sped up some more.

The exit to the underwater channel- a bright white light was growing closer. The exit had been made in the middle of a cliff. The shutter that had been fitted into the rock was already open.

The enemy would definitely come. They were waiting.

“Load tubes one through six with ADCAPs. Flood the tubes. Open all doors.”

“Aye, Captain. Load tubes one through six with ADCAPs. Flood tubes, open all doors!” her second-in-command repeated, and the firearms control officer executed the order.

“Warning! To the crew in the torpedo room and storage deck, please evacuate to the aft!”

“Warning!”

All hands were informed. Through the shrill sirens that reverberated through the ship, the sonar room yelled, “Contact on the sonar array! Very big, right in front of us!”

“Yes, and superior, too.”

Tessa smiled.

“Fire tubes one through six!”

The *Tuatha de Danaan* fired all six ADCAP torpedoes from its torpedo tubes. Each was a 300 kilo warhead that could incapacitate a large warship with one hit. A total of 1.8 megatons of explosives shot towards the tunnel exit at high speed, where the Behemoth was lying in wait in front of the cliff, on the shore.

Every one of them hit.

The fierce sound and shock of the explosion hit the *de Danaan* itself. The floor jumped up, and they were shaken up and down, left and right.

The sonar operator yelled, “Damn it to hell, it’s still alive!”

They could see the image in the periscope. In the entrance of the tunnel directly in front of them stood the enraged Behemoth. It had already lost its howitzer, but it still had its head-mounted machine gun. Although it had been shaken by the enormous explosion, it spread its arms and tried to shoot at them.

“Ram straight into it!”

“Tha-”

“We’ll steamroll it!”

“Aye aye, ma’am! We’ll take it to hell!” the helmsman shouted. The 210,000 horsepower generator roared. All of the propellers let out screams of delight, and the enormous submarine sped up even more.

“All hands, brace for impact!”

Just then, the Behemoth’s head was hit by a number of explosions. In an instant, the giant had lost its balance. It had been attacked from somewhere. More than likely, from the top of the cliff-

Impact.

The bow of the *de Danaan* crashed into the Behemoth’s hip. There was the terrible shriek of warping metal as the two enormous machines met, but the *de Danaan* had the better chance of success. The Behemoth only weighed a few thousand tons, while the *de Danaan* weighed 44,000 tons. It may have been able to defend itself against all sorts of shells, but there was no way it could stop such mass. It was like a truck flying into a pro-wrestler.

The Behemoth was unable to stand in the face of such overwhelming power, and was thrown back. A large sheet of spray was flung up as it slowly turned.

Perhaps it was because of the surprise attack it had received just before the collision, but it seemed that the enemy hadn’t even used its Lambda Driver. The Behemoth had been squarely damaged and collapsed. The armor on its waist and abdomen blew off, and it fell headlong into the sea’s surface as it went to pieces-

Now the *Tuatha de Danaan* had been released into the wide open sea.

“...heh heh. I thought she’d do it. She’s violent when pushed,” came a voice they knew well over the U1 line. It was Kurz. His location was unknown, but his range was zero.

“For once I agree with this guy. It seems we made it just in time,” came the voice of Clouseau similarly. His whereabouts were also unknown, but his range was also zero.

The optical sensor on the periscope moved automatically.

Right in front of the ship’s sail, standing next to the open number 4 hatch, were two M9s where the black and grey ASES, their armor damaged all over, were hanging on.

“Mr. Weber, Mr. Clouseau...!!”

With miraculous timing, they had jumped down from the top of the cliff containing the water channel’s exit. The surprise attack on the Behemoth had been from these two, too.

“Aren’t we awesome?”

“I agree again. Well then... requesting permission to board, Captain.”

Although Tessa was still surprised at the sight of these two with their good grace, she said in a lively voice, “Of course. Enter through hatch 4.”

“Roger, thank you.”

Mardukas, who was standing next to the Captain’s chair, just shrugged.

“Good grief... those guys are obstinate.”

“Maybe. But our loss today was enormous. Very much so.”

Mardukas pinched the rim of his hat, and bent his head as if in silent prayer.

“Yes...”

They had indeed lost much. Too many people. Too much of everything. This curse would probably forever haunt them. And they couldn’t even begin to imagine the many hardships they still faced.

They would fight alone. But-

“We’ll worry about it next week. It’s still too early to relax.”

The deck officer reported that the two ASES were docked. Number 4 hatch was closed. The electronics war officer reported that the enemy helicopters had begun pursuit of the *de Danaan*.

Tessa stood up once, then sat down again in her Captain's chair.

"We're breaking through their net. Emergency maneuvers. Vent MBTs."

"Aye, ma'am! Emergency maneuvers! Vent MBTs!"

And the sound of the piercing, yet reassuring buzzer rang throughout the ship.

Epilogue

There was really nothing that Sousuke, who had been left behind, could do.

Crawling out of the wrecked AS, leaning up against a wall, and then staggering off was about it.

And it ended there, without the enemy showing up again. Nor the police or the fire fighters. He somehow made it to a local armory disguised as a trailer, and took care of his injuries. Since none of them were life threatening, he was back in good condition with just two days' rest.

He didn't watch the news or read the papers.

He didn't want to.

No, not true. Since he was worried about Kyouko, he accessed the internet just once. He found that she was on the list of the critically injured, and had been admitted to a local hospital that he recognized. Since knowing that was enough, he didn't try to find out anything else about the incident.

He didn't know the whereabouts of Wraith, who had probably carried Kyouko to the hospital.

For a start, he had no intentions of looking for her. He probably wouldn't meet her again.

Even continuing with Mithril had become an uncertain prospect.

He was still unable to connect at all to the Merida Island base. And of course, Sydney, too.

And all of the other bases were the same. Every line of communication was dead, and even though he knew the danger of doing so, none of his allies answered him.

After thoroughly checking many lines, and many other measures, he could only come to one conclusion.

Mithril had disappeared.

Every base, every location had been annihilated, and the soldiers engaged in missions there had disappeared.

They might be dead.

They might have escaped.

He didn't know. There was no way for an ordinary individual to know the movements of a secret force of that size. He didn't know what had become of Kurz or Mao. Or Tessa. They might already be dead. If he thought about it objectively, that possibility was overwhelmingly large.

And- Kalinin.

Sousuke and Kalinin had their own means of communication outside of Mithril. But those lines had remained silent.

He was dead.

There was no other data other than that conclusion.

On the morning of the fourth day, Sousuke discretely scrutinized the situation he was now in. When he did so, he found that the conclusion hanging over him was surprisingly simple.

He was alone.

He was now completely, utterly alone.

Everything that he had thought he'd gained was gone in a flash. The fellow soldiers he had relied upon. The classmates he had confided in. The organization that had been his power. The surrogate father that he had trusted.

And a very important girl's smiling face.

At first, he didn't know what he should do. No, he did know. What he had been protecting hadn't just been her physical body. In regards to her world, he needed to at least show some

sincerity. “*I don’t wanna die without knowing anything*”. The complaint of an innocent girl kept pressing hard against his chest.

So, on the fifth morning.

Sousuke Sagara went to school.

It seemed that classes had just resumed.

From before he entered the main gates, he could feel the eyes of the students looking at him widen in surprise. Most of it was surprise; the rest of it was anger.

The school buildings that had been damaged by the battle between giants were still covered with construction sheets here and there. The broken glass panes had not been repaired, but had been closed up with cardboard and packing tape.

The wreckage of the Arbalest that he had left behind in the courtyard had been neatly cleared off. Maybe by the Japanese government, or some affiliated organization. He didn’t know.

Either way, the wreckage had been carried off somewhere.

Ironically, his shoe box was right in front of him. Number 13. Sagara. He put on the slippers that he had used for the past ten months, and headed to the second year, group-four classroom.

When he opened the door and entered the room, the noisy students settled down. Everyone was looking at him. Even Koutarou Onodera. Even Shinji Kazama.

No one was in Kaname Chidori’s seat. That was only natural- she probably would never return to the seat in this classroom ever again.

Kyouko’s seat was also empty. She was still in the hospital.

The chimes rang throughout the school building.

Their homeroom teacher, Eri Kagurazaka, entered for homeroom. She looked tired, with dark circles under her eyes, and as soon as she saw Sousuke, she froze. She looked as if she didn’t know how to look.

“They can also become cruel.”

Hayashimizu’s words came back to him.

Hayashimizu wasn’t in school anymore now that the third-year students had entered exam season.

Even still, Sousuke gathered his courage- yes, courage that was completely different from courage on a battlefield, and said to Eri, “Miss Kagurazaka.”

“...yes?”

“I have something to say. May I have some time?”

“Uh...”

Eri hesitated a moment, dropped her head, looked at Kaname’s seat, and answered as if she were forcing away her sadness, “Yes. It’s alright.”

“Thank you.”

Sousuke took the platform. For some reason, he was reminded of the time he introduced himself the day he had transferred in.

“I think there are some things that need to be said,” Sousuke mumbled in the silence. “The one who was piloting that white AS... yes, was me. I... I’m a pilot of that kind of AS in active service in a mercenary unit. The story that I transferred here from America was a lie.”

They listened in silence as they carefully watched Sousuke.

Under the gaze of those stares, Sousuke told them everything.

He told them how he was a mercenary belonging to a secret organization. He told them how he was a fake student who had transferred with forged papers. He told them of his mission to guard Kaname Chidori. The existence of a large organization that had targeted Kaname. The reason that this school was persecuted on the two field trips.

That the enemy organization had been seriously trying to get Kaname.

And for that reason, that fight had taken place and Kyouko Tokiwa was seriously injured.

And Kaname was taken away in the end.

“I’m sorry for keeping quiet,” he concluded quietly, and one of the students, his shoulders shaking, said, “Wait...”

It was Sousuke’s closest friend, Koutarou Onodera.

“‘I’m sorry’ you say...? You need to say that to Tokiwa.”

“...”

“She’s still in the hospital, with tubes all in her body. But do you know what she said to her family? She gave them a key she had been holding the entire time, and said to see to Chidori’s hamster. ‘I’m begging you’, she said.”

“Really...”

“Tokiwa’s pretty bad off, you know. Don’t you guys feel anything? Did you not think anything of doing that stuff and getting us mixed up in it!?”

Onodera had gotten up from his seat, his eyes flaming with anger, and tried to grab Sousuke.

Several students and Eri stepped in to stop him.

“Let go already!!”

“Stop it, Onodera!”

“I’ve got business with this guy!! Weren’t we friends!? Or were you just fucking with me!?”

“I...”

“You bastard, what did you come to do!? Was it interesting!? Your job is done, right!? So get the hell out of here!”

“I... only wanted to say something.”

He knew now. What would happen. What he wanted to do from here. The words that had resounded so resolutely in his own heart at the time of his defeat.

“And what’s that!?”

“I’m going to bring her back.”

That was it. There wasn’t anything other than that.

He had wanted to declare it. That was all.

“I’m going to bring her back. At all costs. No matter what happens. I will bring her back to this place. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Everyone had gone silent, even Onodera. They were all dumbfounded, not understanding what he meant.

“The fault is mine. She is not to blame. I will definitely bring her back. Definitely.”

He had no direction. He had no plan. He didn’t have anything at all.

But something in his cells was strongly urging him on.

“*You can do it,*” it said. “*Fight,*” it said.

So-

“So when that time comes, please welcome her back.”

There wasn’t any point in listening to replies.

Sousuke turned around, left the classroom, and walked down the corridors he knew so well.

He left the courtyard like that, passing through the main gate, walking straight ahead. To distant lands.

Yes, to distant lands-

And he didn’t even turn around to give the school a second glance.

The End

Afterword (Dehumidification Method)

Umm. Things have developed rapidly.

Nowadays, this kind of story seems to be called a “depressing development”, but I don’t really like those words. It’s just serious, not really depressing. So everyone isn’t giving up.

Since developments where the hero of the story secludes himself in a shell without doing anything, is hesitant and worries all the time are called “deep stories”, I wonder how long they could last. It will be 10 years soon (gazes far off).

Sousuke is not that kind of hero.

He worries, but he moves. Decisively.

Released from the limitations of the short story world, he will increasingly demonstrate more and more characteristics. That’s, well, like a muscleman who flew through the skies on a fart in the beginning, and has become strangely cool since the superman Olympics! (<-a delicately incorrect example)

So with that, let’s try guessing the author’s next development!

1: A heartbroken Sousuke heads to a north-eastern hot springs town by himself. At the Japanese inn full of human interest, his heart is touched by the various people. While he is living comfortably every day in the gentle natural scenery, Sousuke gives up on going after Kaname, and resolves to live his remaining years in this hot springs town. He hooks up with a maid from the Japanese inn and it’s a happy ending.

2: In order to find information on Kaname, whose whereabouts are unknown, Sousuke infiltrates another school.

There's a pretty girl who assumes that Sousuke is her long-lost older brother, and a big ruckus when 108 people crowd into his apartment. He looks into the bathroom by mistake, peels the covers from the girl who wakes up in the morning, and is told, "Ahhh! Big brother, how dirty!" With these delightful developments, both Sousuke and the author completely forget about Kaname.

3: Following Tessa and the *de Danaan* after it has lost its supplies. In order to earn money, they form a traveling circus group. Tessa, whose reflexes are zero, after intensive training, is even depicted as an incredible trapeze artist and big star. It's a terribly moving story. In the event that it's animated, the DVD would be sold by *son only.

4: Kaname, who has been captured by Amalgam, purges Leonard and the leaders with her harisen, and seizes control of the organization. Now the new great leader, Kaname's raised objective is complete control of the Kantou mafia world! At the outset, the ones facing the inhumane Amalgam, which has begun to sweep destruction on the Sengawa streets, are the Mikihara gang, which has accepted the resourceful general President Hayashimizu as their young leader, and Bonta-kun! Sousuke is lost somewhere far away without any knowledge of this.

...something like that. It's still page 3...

Ah, by the way, the other day I went to Taiwan and Hong Kong for business. I signed autographs in Taiwan, but the wonderful reception I received surprised me. The food was delicious, the town was interesting, and the girls were pretty, so I

had a lot of fun- Yano, Shi, Cindy, and everyone else from Taiwin Kadokawa, truly, thank you very much! I want to come again!

Now, as for Hong Kong... I collected data with the anime staff (smile). The time and the media are not released yet, but thanks to you, a new anime is in production. I shared a room with the director, Mr. Takemoto, and I guess it was the fatigue, because I bothered him by snoring loudly. It was a busy trip, but a very interesting and incident-filled one.

Now then. Since the main story will rapidly continue from here on, the next book won't end it. There's still a ways to go. The ultimate objective is to precisely and tightly end it. There won't be any dragging on with endless developments or stopping it incompletely to start another series.

So don't worry.

What will happen now? What will you do with the story?

I don't know. Both Sousuke and I are greatly perplexed right now.

But well, if it were him, he'd try to do something. Please believe that.

Until next time.

September, 2004

Shinji Gatou

PART 1

Hayashimizu retires as Student Council President. What is presented in Chapter 1 is "A Collapse of Paradise". What is shown with the title page is the loss of tranquility.



"CONTINUING ON MY OWN" SPECIAL PROJECT
DOUJI SHIKI ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION



PART 2

Leonard slips past Sousuke's guard and appears in Kaname's apartment. Kaname is disturbed by being invited to Amalgam.

PART 3

Mithril's headquarters is attacked, and his comrades die... What is the fate of Sousuke and Kaname as they run all over the place to escape Amalgam's attacks?



"CONTINUING ON MY OWN" SPECIAL PROJECT
DOUJI SHIKI ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION



PART 4

The Merida Island base is under attack by enormous Ases, the Behemoths, and a gap forms within the crew, who now face a desperate situation. Tessa is put to the test!



PART 5

The crew of the De Danaan are under pressure in a hard fight against the powerful Behemoths. Kurz and the rest of the combat fighting force are challenged to a fight to the death!

"CONTINUING ON MY OWN" SPECIAL PROJECT
DOUJI SHIKI ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION



PART 6

The fight on Merida Island continues. And in Tokyo: Kyouko has been taken hostage by Amalgam operatives!



PART 7

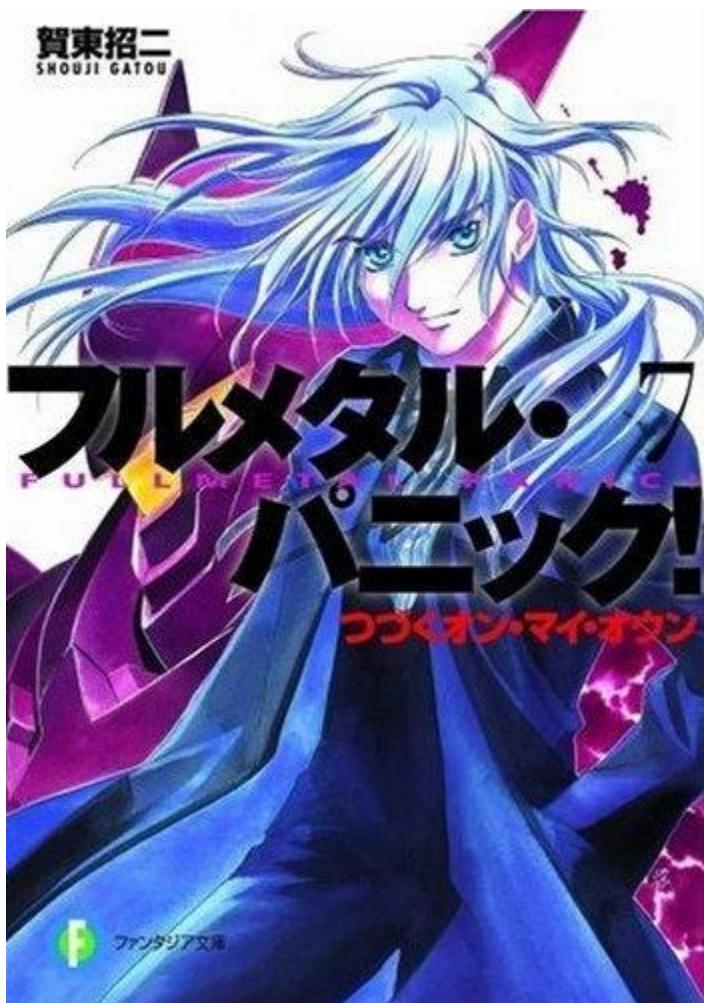
To save Kyouko. To protect
Kaname. And to keep from
losing her smiling face.
Sousuke and the Arbalet
face the decisive battle.



PART 8

The final story in "Continuing On My Own". A new model AS finally appears. What will happen to Sousuke in front of this new enemy who displays some amazing power!?

賀東招二
SHOUJI GATOU



Translator's Afterword:

Wow, this has been one hell of a ride with this book. Since I started it, I've gotten married, had three different jobs, and have had numerous other life changes. I almost can't believe that I've finished it. When I started, I got a good start on it, then real life took over, and it got put on the back burner for almost five months. I appreciate those people who had the patience to wait for me to get back to it. This has been my favorite book by far, because it moves so fast, so much stuff happens, and the characters grow in ways they hadn't before. I'm just glad that I have the ability to share it with others, because while spoilers are nice, everyone likes to read the original. I think my favorite part in this book had to be the end, where Sousuke has fallen to Leonard, but he doesn't give up until Kaname gives herself over. Just the determination- I had that part perfect in my head when I first read it almost two years ago now. It's amazing how just wanting to do one part will carry you through an entire book sometimes :D To be honest, I was able to fly through the last two chapters of the book in the past three weeks (for anyone wondering, that means absolutely ALL of my free time and half of my sleeping time taken up translating). Anyway, so we've finished COMO, and in the next book, Burning One Man Force, we follow Sousuke as he starts on his journey to find Kaname. It's a pretty wild ride, too, and I look forward to bringing it to everyone.

Well, it's almost one in the morning now, and after working on this ever since I got up this morning, I think it might be time for a break. Think I'll finish up some pork barbecue, listen to some BoA, then head to bed. I'm working too hard this Memorial Day weekend.

Well, until Burning One Man Force (all Sousuke, all AS fighting, all the time!)

Brandi
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Boku-tachi
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